

Brief History/Syria-Lebanon

The Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon

A Brief History

The Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon is part of the worldwide communion of churches rooted in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century in Europe. Early in the 19th century, missionaries belonging mostly to the Reformed family of the Reformation tradition (i.e., Presbyterian and Congregational churches) came mostly from the United States of America (as well as Great Britain, Germany and Scotland) to the Middle East to spread the central message of that Reformation. Their starting point was Beirut.

From Beirut the missionaries soon commenced their efforts in the direction of the Lebanese and Syrian coastline, toward Mount Lebanon and toward major portions of the Syrian interior. From Beirut also they launched a mission toward the Armenians of Turkey. As of the mid-1840s, local converts emerged and Evangelical congregations began to form in several locations in Lebanon and Syria.

Everywhere they settled, the missionaries established elementary and secondary schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages, and other institutions for social and educational services. They served the Lebanese population, Muslim and Christian, without discrimination, thus contributing to better understanding and creating a culture of dialogue.

In the mid-19th century the formal recognition of a “Protestant Millet” (sect) was granted by the Ottoman authorities, and thus the community began to enjoy the political and socioeconomic privileges and responsibilities of other Christian Millets.

In the late 19th century Quaker and Baptist churches began to form in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and with the exodus of Evangelical Armenians from Turkey into Syria and Lebanon after the massacres of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of local Evangelicals in the Syrian and Lebanese cities increased significantly.

With the dawn of the 20th century new Evangelical mission agencies from churches in the West entered the field of service in Lebanon. Like their predecessors, all these churches sought to offer educational, medical, social and cultural services in addition to spreading the Reformation faith. Of these, the Churches of God, the Christian Alliance Church, the Church of the Nazarene, the Church of the Brethren and that of the Seventh-Day Adventists may be mentioned.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 a number of Anglicans (Episcopalians) took refuge in Lebanon and established for themselves a small parish in Beirut.

The presence of such a multiplicity of Evangelical denominations within the one Protestant Church communion in Syria and Lebanon is of course an authentic expression of the basic Reformation principle of the freedom of the Christian with regard to the structure and polity of the historical-visible church. The variety of these churches and groups, however, did not fit well or correspond properly with the organizational reality of Christianity in the East—the latter being more hierarchical and mono-organic by nature. This reflected negatively on the Protestant community such that the Mandatory French authorities over Syria and Lebanon promulgated an ordinance in the year 1936 confirming the rights, privileges and duties of the various local religious confessions with regard to laws of Personal Status that totally ignored the Protestant community. The pretext was that the Evangelical denominations in the two countries did not constitute a church or a confession in the proper sense of the word.

In response to this state of affairs, the Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon formed for themselves in 1937 the “Supreme Council of the Evangelical Community in Syria and Lebanon.” The Supreme Council thus became the formal and legal umbrella organization under which all the above-mentioned denominations operate. The Council acts as the official representative body vis-à-vis the Lebanese and Syrian states.

The Council, however, now serves also as the only dialoguing partner with all the other religious bodies (Muslim and Christian) in the two countries. It is representative of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Reformation tradition in the public affairs of Syria and Lebanon. It tackles issues of justice, peace and coexistence among the communities of Syria and Lebanon. Today it is temporarily headquartered in Rabiya, El-Metn, Mt. Lebanon, and is governed through an Executive Committee and presided over by the Rev. Dr. Salim Sahiouny since 1983.