



Audrey and Colin Gibson

Link Letter no. 24 | May 2022

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Location: Lebanon



What we do: Working with A Rocha Lebanon on creation care projects, Colin as national director and Audrey as education and church liaison officer.

Dear friends,

And it's from the old I travel to the new; keep me traveling along with you.

Our time in Lebanon has come to an end and we are writing this letter on our slow (environmentally friendly!) journey by land and sea back to the UK. The words of the children's hymn above seem especially appropriate as we travel from the "old" of our time in Lebanon to something new, and as we do it seems a good time to reflect on our six and a half years in that most beautiful, but damaged, country.

When we arrived in December 2015 it was the height of the Syrian refugee crisis with concern whether ISIS would continue their expansion into Lebanon. We found a country of tremendous contrasts. On the one hand great poverty and hardship, among some Lebanese as well as the refugees, yet also immense wealth and a relatively privileged middle class. Working for a Christian organisation we quickly learned about the divisions among churches there and how the political, religious and social arenas are tightly intertwined. We also heard about corruption and how patronage plays a big part in everyday life. We tried to keep an open mind.

Fortunately, ISIS was stopped at the border by the Lebanese army and militia from Hezbollah (itself a hint of the complexities in Lebanon). Encouragingly, we have witnessed breakthroughs with some churches working together, though often only in the face of a crisis.

Sadly, in most other ways things have got worse. The corruption (we concluded there can be no other explanation to so many issues) and patronage continue to stifle any meaningful change for the better. The privileged lifestyle of many came to a sudden end when the economy collapsed as the country had been living beyond its means for decades. Then there was the pandemic and the massive explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020, the investigation into which is still going nowhere nearly two years later.

Like most outside observers, we see a country with tremendous potential and a people who are amazingly resilient (though they wish they did not have to be), yet one that seems unable to work for the good of all, rather than the benefit of the few. Please pray that the new government (after elections in May) will initiate positive reforms that truly benefit everyone.



Leaving Lebanon on board a ferry to Turkey.

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**With Jesus
With each other
To the edges**



Yet despite all the difficulties we feel privileged to have been led by God to serve there. Every day threw up a new challenge, which was both exhausting and exciting – life was never dull. We feel blessed to have spent time there; it was a very rich and rewarding experience where we learned a lot and made many good friends.

We always knew that leaving Lebanon would be hard, with the sadness of parting from friends combined with the excitement of seeing what God has in store for us. Having made the decision, we started planning an “orderly transition”: at work, at church and to say final farewells. Sadly, we did not know how difficult these few months would be as the sudden and unexpected death of Audrey’s sister in mid-February required us to make a hurried return to the UK to arrange her funeral and sort out her affairs. This left us physically tired and for Audrey, emotionally drained. Since our return to Lebanon at the end of March –

delayed by a bout of Covid – our “orderly transition” has been crammed into only a few weeks. It took its toll on us, in multiple ways, but throughout we have (tried to) travel along with God and we are grateful for his grace and mercy – and a few final achievements.

At A Rocha Lebanon we have appointed two very enthusiastic co-national directors to take over from me. Damien and Guillaume will job share the role and together they bring a wealth of experience to the position. Please pray for them as they start work, especially as the handover was condensed into three days – before they were even officially appointed – rather than three weeks, as I had hoped. Meanwhile, at our nature park at Mekse we managed another tree planting session, which included our first pond dipping activity, this time for ARL members and friends. Work finally started on building the reception office, toilets and a storeroom too.

At church, I handed over to a new treasurer and Audrey handed over her responsibilities for the Little Sheep parent and toddlers’ group. We had a lovely send off at our final service where we were presented with a certificate of appreciation for our contribution to church life. We have also had many invitations to see friends “before we go” and had a combined birthday celebration (for Audrey) and farewell meal with others too. In between all this we packed and sent off most of our goods to be air-freighted back to the UK while we finally left Lebanon on Friday 29 April by ferry to Turkey – though even that was delayed by a day, at the last minute! On our way back to the UK we plan to stop in Portugal for a few days to see our daughter, who lives there, and our son who will visit from London. It will be good to spend some family time together.

We are looking forward to seeing many of you from June onwards during our visits to supporting churches. No doubt the next few months will be busy as there are other CMS matters to attend to as well including time for reflection and seeking God for our next step. We would value your prayers that God will guide us as we “travel to the new”.

Audrey and Colin



Photos from top to bottom: Farewell meal with A Rocha Lebanon board, staff and volunteers; PCC and church members at All Saints Church, Beirut; Tree Planting at Mekse nature park; First pond dipping at Mekse.



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