

THE CHURCH AND THE WAR IN LEBANON

I. Interview with A Union President

by Malcolm Russell

Robert Darnell was most recently president of the Middle East Union of Seventh-day Adventists. He holds a doctorate in Near Eastern languages and literature from the University of Michigan, and is a new member of the faculty of Loma Linda University. The following interview took place Aug. 25, 1976, shortly after Darnell's return to the United States. A note about the interviewer may be found on page 46.

—The Editors

Russell: In your score of years in the Middle East, you have been through many crises, but this one has probably been different in duration and destruction. How have our church members and institutions fared up to the time of your departure in July?

Darnell: The Lord has shown remarkable providence over us and our properties. Despite the heavy fighting, physical damage has been limited mostly to broken windows, the results of stray bullets rather than malice. At the

'Ashrafiyya Church, for example, which lies near the Museum and the dividing line in Beirut, every window has been broken. On Sabtiyya hill, where most of our institutions are located, the damage was generally less, particularly before the fighting around Tal al-Za'tar.

Our members likewise generally remained safe, although Krikor Yessayan, a dedicated binder at Middle East Press, was killed last fall while buying food for his family. Others have recovered from wounds, or lost some possessions, but God has blessed and cared for his members.

Russell: Was this protection observed by others?

Darnell: Certainly. Until this latest fighting around Tal al-Za'tar, children played in Sabtiyya Street, and refugees came to the area "because God was protecting the hill." You must remember that tragedy has struck almost every home, that proportionately 2,000,000 Americans would have died.

Russell: Aside from the physical destruction, how could our institutions operate during the fighting? How did Middle East College complete a full academic year when no other institution of higher learning in the country managed to do so?

Darnell: To answer the second question first, when the battles first started, it was not unlike the past—the periodic turmoil which we have experienced in Lebanon in 1958, 1971 and 1973. We thought that the fighting would pass; certainly, it would be over for the summer tourist season. Thus morale was high, and problems at the college escalated at a slow pace: if the shell had hit the cafeteria in the beginning, the school would naturally have been closed quickly.

Russell: What's this about shelling the cafeteria?

Darnell: Both the college administration building and cafeteria were hit by shells in July, during the fighting for Tal al-Za'tar. The administration building was not structurally damaged, although the glass around the stairwell was sent flying. On the other hand, the cafeteria suffered

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a direct hit, at the end of mealtime, by a 122 mm shell. This knocked one of those hewn limestone blocks out of the wall and sent it flying across the room, missing the students seated within before it hit the opposite wall. The shell itself did not follow the stone inside the building, but rather fell back outside, and there exploded. To those who were there, the absence of serious injuries was evidence of God's providence—but I doubt that we would have continued the school year if something like this had happened at the beginning.

Russell: Back to where you were before we

interrupted: How did the college manage throughout the school year?

Darnell: It was probably the best learning experience the students ever had. They did learn their normal courses, but in addition they experienced God's care in a very personal way. One result of this was the special *Pine Echoes* [the Middle East College yearbook], which contained student testimonials of God's care.

Now all this does not mean that we did not have problems, particularly with supplies. Herbert Faimann, at the college bakery, tried to continue deliveries of his bread, but eventually the trucks could not cross the demarcation line to stores in West Beirut. New outlets opened up, and he continued to produce at the usual level. However, Brother Faimann had no inside track on flour, and the high-grade imported quality which he uses became very scarce after the port was closed by fighting. At one point, it seemed that his supplies would be exhausted; almost none were left. Then a truck entered the city, carrying flour for other bakeries. The driver, fearing cross-fire and even murder, decided to cut his route short and asked for nearby bakeries. He was directed to Middle East College, where he sold the whole load—right at the time of exhaustion.

Similarly, gasoline reserves were used up. Some of our people went down to the main street, to hail down tanker trucks and ask for deliveries. One who refused to deliver his present load promised to do something in the future. Now our workers thought that this was polite evasion, but two days later the same driver brought so much oil that the storage tanks were filled to overflowing, and they had to call in families to bring their cars and cans to purchase all that the driver had supplied.

Fuel oil, used for heating, seemed miraculously to last until spring, when the weather was warmer and the heat was no longer needed.

There was always enough water and food, but prices were sometimes high. Gasoline was very scarce, and was stolen from some cars, but there was nowhere to drive most of the time, anyway.

Russell: Besides the college, how did the larger Adventist community manage during the fighting?

Darnell: Church attendance grew. Elder Schantz, then the president of the East Mediterranean Field, conducted several excellently

attended evangelistic series despite nearby gunfire. Amid the fighting, there were people who looked for something spiritual.

Russell: Would you say, then, that the Lebanese, long famed for worldly sophistication, are in their suffering turning to God and seeking comfort in spiritual things?

Darnell: Unfortunately, that's not really the case. Satan uses war to influence the minds of man, and while people look for security, and more come to church, Christ's love and teachings actually have almost no place in most people's minds.

There are also serious disadvantages in trying to operate a church mission under these circumstances. The literature evangelism, work was halted by the kidnappings, torture and killings. Then there have been the tremendous economic costs of continuing to operate during the conflict. The Middle East Press, for example, which previously shipped books directly from the airport now has had to truck them through one militia checkpoint after another, finally leaving the country and reshipping them abroad. The five primary and secondary schools also suffered: with the students' parents out of work, they were not able to pay tuition. Rather than turn away students who in some cases had been attending our schools for years, we allowed them to continue. Now, of course, our schools owe great debts and in practical terms are bankrupt. Only large aid from the church in the rest of the world will reestablish our work again.

Russell: With much of your income dried up, how were you able to pay the teachers and other workers during the fighting?

Darnell: To understand how that was done, you will have to remember that the major institutions—the college, press, division and union—are all located on one hill, which lies within the Christian zone. One bank remained open in Jounieh [the small port north of Beirut which has served as the Christian “capital”], and maintained ties with a bank in Paris. The General Conference sent funds through France to us; while a couple of times the payroll was late because the roads were closed, the funds eventually got through. While talking about help from the General Conference, I would like to mention the special gift the General Conference sent to each of our workers, national as well as foreign.

Russell: You mentioned nationals and foreigners. Was there any tension between these two groups as a result of the troubles?

Darnell: No, not really. There was fear that when it became too dangerous only the missionaries would be evacuated. It wasn't so much a point of controversy, but of concern. Elder Schmidt [C. E. Schmidt, the Afro-Mideast Division treasurer] did point out the particular obligation of the church to return a worker to his homeland; there were also assurances that the Lebanese would not be ignored. In fact, there was no serious talk of evacuation by local denominational leaders until the final battle (Tal al-Za'tar).

Russell: Did the outside funds, foreign workers and large institutions give the impression in Lebanon that the Adventists were American-oriented, and likely to be aligned with particular political groups?

Darnell: The question really assumes too much. I do not think that Adventism is perceived as particularly American—there have been too many European missionaries for that. On the other hand, we are viewed as “western.” But we have avoided alliances with political groups or objectives and we do not seem to be identified in the public mind with any particular political group. Geography placed most of our institutions and members within the Kata'ib (Phalangist) zone, but our welfare work has served all.

Russell: What kind of relations has the Adventist Church in general, and the College in particular, had with the various sides which are now fighting in Lebanon?

Darnell: With the political groups as such, we have had very little official contact. It has not been our policy to become involved in local politics. On the other hand, we have let our beliefs be known, and students from all communities came to Middle East College over the years.

Russell: Could you be more specific?

Darnell: Well, take the Druze community, for example, one of whose leaders, Kamal Jumblat, is a nonsmoking vegetarian. He is now the number one leftist. Druze students have come to Middle East College and enjoyed the clean air, food and life style. The Adventist community would probably welcome certain of the goals of the Left, such as the establishment of a secular

state and the abolishment of confessionalism in the government. On the other hand, if secularization meant the elimination of parochial schools, there would be great hardship.

Russell: Well, what about the Right?

Darnell: Much the same could be said here. The Maronite Community has also given students to Middle East College. They have given Lebanon its uniqueness—a character which has made it a bridge between east and west. Adventists chose Lebanon as the site for Middle East College because of the nation's special character. We remain aware, of course, that there are fanatical religious elements who are not pleased to see Seventh-day Adventists in the country. We don't think they dominate the right any more than the left is dominated by its extremist elements.

Russell: As a result would our work be hurt if the "left" won?

Darnell: As far as what might happen if any particular party achieves complete victory, it is difficult, and probably unwise, to conjecture in print. A negotiated peace, by confirming a pluralist society, might be particularly beneficial and at the same time lie within Lebanese tradition. At any rate, whoever wins, our work is under God's care, and we will continue to carry on, perhaps with greater liberty than before.

Russell: But given the brutality and closeness of the civil war, hasn't the Adventist community, deliberately or not, been linked with a particular side?

Darnell: We have been a help to all communities. We remained, and paid our workers when other foreign organizations pulled out, leaving their workers unemployed. The population has generally recognized that the Adventists did not come merely to enjoy Lebanon's prosperity, and then leave in adversity. Even the local Phalangist militia saw this: we were specifically exempted from the shakedowns and demands for protection money. However, the Adventist community had already collected a sum of about \$1,500, which was made available for use at this time. Informed of this, the militia commander exclaimed, "Other churches talk, the Adventists do!"

In fact, it has been a very good thing that our members have stayed out of the fighting. For example, once in leftist-held territory, a local militia commander was assassinated. Like other homes, those of our members were searched,

and often ransacked, with the household lined up against the wall. For them it was a very frightening experience. Had they possessed any guns, they would have been executed.

Russell: Has this position of noninvolvement led to serving the interests of those around? Have the militias, for example, tried to fight from our institutions?

Darnell: Well, obviously we will not oppose armed men, but our policy has been to inform any would-be occupiers that the area by agreement is not to be involved in fighting because it is religious and educational property. This may make the group leader halt and check with his headquarters, which will know of the understanding.

Russell: Turning from the recent past to the near future, what do you expect will happen to the Adventist Church in Lebanon?

Darnell: This is obviously a most critical time for decisions. Most of the Middle East College student body has decided to transfer to another college for the coming year, and many of the faculty have done so, too.

Much of the Lebanese population has been forced by the war circumstances to abandon

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their homes. The general experience is that an unoccupied property is looted. However, we still have workers remaining at each of our institutions.

Our Lebanese members recognize that opportunities for jobs with the church and for schooling for their children may be lost. This leads to emigration. The serious question is really "Can a national constituency survive?" There is little doubt that when peace comes there will be fewer members, but hopefully there will also be wider opportunities for personal witness.

Russell: Isn't this what some have said for years—that our membership in Lebanon and much of the Middle East was far too dependent on denominational employment?

Darnell: This war does emphasize the obvious—that if the church stopped employment, Sabbath problems, economic needs and other matters might make our members leave.

Russell: Leave the church?

Darnell: No; leave the country, emigrate. For many of our members, there is no real alternative. This, of course, is a weakness. It shows how difficult it is for the Church to set deep roots in the community, but perhaps that is God's will—we are, after all, pilgrims here. Our church is not alone in this problem. Emigration from Lebanon is something of a national tradition.

Russell: You have now told us about the experiences of the past year and the difficulties looming in the immediate future. Are there any long-term lessons which you can see resulting from these events?

Darnell: Certainly. We found that God provided everything we needed. His care was unbelievable compared to the sufferings of the people around us.

We can perhaps generalize somewhat about the specific qualities of those who decided to remain at their posts in hazardous times. In the first place, of course, some people can tolerate more danger than others. Secondly, there must be a faith in God as a sustainer. One phrase seemed obvious to those of us who remained, and was frequently repeated: "We can go ahead because God is with us."

The third requirement for effective work in conditions of personal risk is an understanding of the objectives and purposes. One must have the feeling "I'm here for a purpose, I know it, and I must fulfill it." Some jobs are obviously more purposeful than others—the welfare director, the baker and the local teacher all serve specific needs. On the other hand, someone teaching American students the same courses as they would receive in the United States is less

likely to see any necessity of doing this in some dangerous spot.

If we really believe that we're going to complete the work under difficulties, as we have been told, then we need to have a growing trust in God's care; we need to improve our threshold for handling difficulty, and we must gain a well-defined image of ourselves individually and as a church. Only then can we achieve its purposes.

Thinking specifically of Lebanon, we have learned how easily the spirit of brutality and inhumanity can possess people who are normally courteous, hospitable and kind. What has hurt the most, even more than the daily tragedies of destruction, is the hatred in people's hearts towards others of whom they know nothing: the label "Moslem," or "Christian" is enough to evoke the darkest passions.

Russell: What about our wider mission work—will strife in Lebanon between Christians and Moslems hinder our work in other Islamic countries?

Darnell: It will increase the difficulties. Reports of atrocities have often been slanted for local consumption, and the news from Lebanon has led to a new bitterness towards Christians in the rest of the Moslem world. However, the increase in Moslem opposition only challenges us to reach an excellence of Christlikeness that God can use to remove that bitterness. The Moslem-Christian confrontation is further reason for us to seek out the means by which the Holy Spirit works in the Moslem world. The Holy Spirit may work as the Moslem world consolidates against the Christian to expose the real aims of the apostate forces in the Last Day. Without this reinforcement of resistance to Christianity, the Moslem lands might suffer a cultural collapse which at this time could further the spread of apostasy in the Moslem world more than open doors to righteousness. While current events in the world may increase difficulties for our work here and there, we also see them controlled so as to accomplish the divine purpose. The strife in Lebanon is doubtless an example of this fact.

Russell: Thank you very much.