

**The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore.  
Amen.**

The speech of Bishop Dr Munib A. Younan  
Graduation of Near School of Theology (NEST)  
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Your Excellencies,  
The President and Faculty of NEST  
Members of the Board of Trustees  
Graduates, Sally and Liza

It is an honor for me to address the graduates at this commencement ceremony. The Near School of Theology continues to be a joint venture among the four Evangelical Churches: namely the ELCJHL, the Anglican Church, the National Synod in Syria and Lebanon, and the Armenian Evangelical Union. NEST is committed to educate and prepare the next generation for the service of the Christian Church in general and the Evangelical family in specific. In the ecumenical discourse, the emphasis is more than ever on the significance of theological formation. NEST is an integral part of this education.

But today, I will not talk about the theological education. Rather, I want to charge you with three pieces of advice.

1.

We are proud in the Evangelical Family in the Middle East, that FMEEC unanimously decided to ask its member Churches to ordain women in 2010. We are very happy that our member Churches of

FMEEC took this decision very seriously. As a result of that, we were very delighted when the National Synod in Syria and Lebanon ordained two women pastors last year. We were also pleased to learn that both the ecumenical circles as well as interfaith partners received our two ordained sisters in very dignified ways. This is but an evidence that in our Evangelical Churches in the Middle East, ministry will be deficient if both genders do not equally serve the Lord Jesus Christ in preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.

As you both are preparing yourself for ministry and later on for ordination, be aware, that you also are vanguards in your respective Churches. You are called to be ministers in His Church. In his lecture on Galatians, Martin Luther wrote: “The reason of our proud boasting is that we are in a divine calling and in God’s own work, and that the people need to be assured of your calling, in order that they may know that our word is intact the Word of God.” Lectures on Galatians, 1535). This is the reason, I ask you as St Paul asked his disciple Timothy: “Let no one despise your youth...” and I would add to Sally and Liza, “Let no one despise your youth or gender, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” (1 Tim 4:12)

2.

What is the role of a pastor in the Evangelical Churches of the Middle East at this very critical juncture in history? The Church of God in the Middle East is facing many political, ideological and economic challenges. The Church is witnessing in times when religious extremism is proliferating among various denominations, sects and religions. Such kind of extremism has driven some of our grassroots to adopt an ideology of populism. Some of our Churches are even facing internal power struggles. Middle Eastern Christians are resorting to emigration and some are seeking safe havens in the western countries. How can an Evangelical pastor witness in the face of these unprecedented challenges? To answer extremism with extremism or populism with populism are never an option for the Evangelical pastor. This is the reason, the challenge is not how pure is our Evangelical doctrine or teaching, but is the Evangelical

Church in the Middle East relevant in our societies? Is the Church relevant to the needs and queries of our grassroots? We can not only boast in our history and its achievements one hundred or fifty years ago. It can be that our fore-parents were relevant in our societies. The challenge is how can you be relevant in carrying the Word of Love in a context of war, occupation, hatred, extremism, division and even internal disagreements in some evangelical Churches? How can the Church be relevant and contextual in this time and in this context? Can the Evangelical pastor or theologian think out of the box under such circumstances, but also keep loyal to the core of our Evangelical faith? Can the pastor be prophetic for love? Can you both as fresh committed graduates carry the message of relevance to your own Churches and societies?

This is the reason, that the Church and her pastors today are called to evangelize the populist piety in our Churches. This means that your task is to challenge the populist wrong piety or false spirituality that is adopted among the grassroots with the Gospel of love. The Gospel calls us to love the Triune God and love your neighbor as yourself. This means that you attempt in your ministry to allow Christ to come back to the center of the Church and thus to the marketplace of our societies. It is to allow Christ to again send His Holy Spirit, to mold us, refresh us, strengthen us and to burn all fake piety that is hindering us to be living witnesses in our societies. Today, the Evangelical movement in the Middle East is at a critical juncture: How can we be a relevant with our living witness? Can we be instruments of peace, brokers of justice, defenders of human rights including gender justice, initiators of interfaith dialogue, bridge builders, ministers of reconciliation and apostles of love? This is not only our challenge but our relevant call. And both of you are called to discern your vocation at this time and this context. We promise you that we will work hand in hand with you so that Christ's message becomes relevant in our Churches and societies.

3.

As a young theologian, ordained in the Lutheran Church in Jerusalem, I was assigned to tasks bigger than me. I always asked the good Lord: Why me? Can I do it? I do not have the knowledge

and experience of my colleagues. There are better theologians than me, better administrators than me, better pastors than me. The answer I always got from the Lord is that the Lord wants me to carry the Gospel of love with relevance wherever I am called, whether locally, regionally and/or globally. However, I always turned to prayer before any task or mission, and the Lord never failed me. Through daily prayer and meditation, I was always amazed that when Christ calls, He always equips and qualifies. I always felt that if I trusted my Lord and Savior in very difficult circumstances, tasks, missions or decisions, the Good Lord guided me, strengthened me, gave me wisdom and showed me the way of humble ministry.

This is exactly what I want to share with you at this commencement. As laborers in the vineyard of God, always turn to prayer, and ask the Lord to show you the way. Ask the Lord what message of relevance He puts in your heart to carry to your Church and society. Prayer is the strength of every servant of the Lord. St James writes: "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (James 4: 16).

This is the reason, as young theologians, I will advise you to pray unceasingly and do not be afraid to be God's hands in your mission. God told Joshua: "Be strong and courageous, do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord God is with you wherever you go." (Josh 1: 9).

May God bless you both and bless this College to continue to prepare servants to serve our Triune God's mission in order to advance God's Kingdom in our world.  
Mabrouk and Alf Mabrouk.

The peace of the Lord be with all of you.