One more candle

December 12, 2006

The Lebanese Presbyterian community is faithfully lighting candles on an Advent wreath this Sunday—and waiting. Disillusionment and desperation are growing all around them in Beirut, but, as Pastor Joseph Kassab says, “We have no choice here but to hope in a better future.” Then he adds: “Unfortunately, we don’t control it.”

Besides being a pastor, Kassab is the general secretary of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL), a body of 38 Presbyterian congregations headquartered in Beirut. Like other Lebanese pastors, Kassab continues to make the case for hope amid a political chaos that has reduced Beirut to rubble and pushed Christians out of the region as they seek employment elsewhere.

Lebanon itself is a metaphor for Advent. Here Christians are waiting to see concrete acts of God within history even though they have little evidence that deliverance is at hand, and even though they are too depleted to imagine what deliverance would look like.

“The future here is in the hands of the superpowers, in the hands of other countries,” sighs Kassab as he muses over the meddling in Lebanon of outsiders—Iran, Syria, Israel, France, other Arab countries, the United States. “Again, Lebanon is caught between all kinds of . . . factions.”

The fallout of last summer’s 34-day Israeli-Hezbollah conflict is weighing heavily on Lebanon’s national unity government, a fragile entity that represents Lebanon’s nationalist aspirations. It came into being when Syrian troops withdrew after a 29-year military presence.

Major Shi‘ite cabinet ministers—most notably Hezbollah members—have walked out of the government, raising anxiety about the country’s unity. Lebanon’s independence is just one of the casualties of violence that has laid waste to Beirut and left Lebanon’s southern area in ruins. Since the early 1970s the country has endured ethnic and religious carnage, a civil war, an influx of Palestinians (including fighters from the Palestine Liberation Organization), invasion and occupation by Israel, and quasi-occupation by Syria.

“You can’t tell people not to be afraid. There is real physical danger,” says Adeeb Awad, Presbyterian pastor and NESSL director of church life. “So we sit with them and try to figure out the best way to deal with the situations that they’re in. We have to be realistic. We’re not living in a dream. The situation is very bad. But we are called to be here.”

Christians in Lebanon constitute 30 percent of the population at most, and Protestants represent about 2 percent of the Christians. But the 30 percent figure is dropping, as the latest round of violence drives more young Christians out of Lebanon in search for jobs. The church laments the flight and perceives the rising number of departing Lebanese, Iraqi and Palestinian Christians as a threat to the continued existence of Christians in the region.

In the wake of the summer’s strife, human rights groups are accusing both Hezbollah and Israel of abusing civilians. Human Rights Watch says that Israel systemically failed to distinguish between combatants and civilians, engaging in some missions with “dubious military gain and extreme human cost.” The organization condemns Israel’s use of cluster bombs, thousands of which remain unexploded in Lebanon. The weapons lie in fields and from trees, ready to explode and cause more civilian deaths and maimings. Human Rights Watch accuses Hezbollah of abuse too, pointing to the storing of rocket launchers and weapons in populated areas, the use of human shields and the firing of rockets into civilian areas in northern Israel. Hezbollah also used cluster bombs, Human Rights Watch says, but not nearly to the same degree as the Israeli army.

“We’re just tired of war,” says 67-year-old Jamil Zorab, mayor of Alma Ashaab, a tiny Christian town just north of the Israeli border. “That’s what we’re asking God for [this Advent]—no more war.” Zorab says that 85 houses were damaged last summer in his town, with repairs costing up to $30,000 per house. Destruction to crops is inestimable, although he figures that he himself has lost $10,000 in an unharvested melon crop.

Humanitarian groups estimate that more than 120,000 Lebanese houses were damaged in the summer blitz and 20,000 destroyed. One thousand civilians were killed, many of them children, women and elderly people.

Witnessing in the midst of such ongoing destruction and despair is hard work. “As people of faith, we don’t rely on hope in the situation around us,” says Kassab. “It is

very politicized, and there is no hope in that. Our hope comes from believing that history is firmly in the hands of God.

“Who knows what is the will of God?” he asks. “Once there were Christians in Antioch and Philippi and Thessalonica and now there are none. But then there was no Christian church in the U.S. or in China. We have to look at our faith from a wide angle.”

Maybe, he says, the U.S. elections will alter policy in the Middle East. Maybe the powers-that-be will focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which most Middle Easterners blame for their region’s trauma.

Maybe.

Pastor Awad says that reading the second chapter of the book of Daniel brought him calm and peace recently, even though he’s read the verses a thousand times and felt no direct application to his own life.

“This time it opened a great light. The idea of a kingdom not made by human hands.” In the text, Nebuchadnezzar’s dream perplexes his seers until Daniel offers a more consoling interpretation—a vision of four kingdoms that rise and fall, followed by a kingdom that Daniel’s vision promises shall never be destroyed or be left to other people, one that “shall stand forever.”

For Awad, the insight is theological eureka, a reminder that when his people light one more Advent candle, God is imagining deliverance even though God’s people are almost too exhausted to hope for it.