

Bishop Philip's Visit to Lebanon Finally Takes Place

An event long planned and prayed for finally happened in October 2022. An official visit by Bishop Philip to meet with and encourage Christian leaders in Lebanon and explore the possibility of establishing a partnership link of some sort between Christians in Cornwall and Christians in Lebanon, building on the ancient commercial and cultural links between both places since the Phoenicians traded their wares for our Cornish tin at the start of the bronze age – recent archaeology on a shipwreck in the eastern Mediterranean has established that this can be traced back to at least before 1500BC. The visit was also by way of being a follow up on the work Bishop Philip and team undertook for the Foreign Office in 2019 by researching the extent of persecution of Christians worldwide and reviewing the work of the Foreign Office and its diplomatic service in supporting or otherwise Christian victims of persecution. As Lebanon hosts the headquarters of the major churches serving the Middle East region as a whole it was an obvious place to start.

David Fieldsend, the Bishop's advisor for International Affairs and member of the Truro Diocese International Links committee, led the support team for Bishop Philip's official visit to Lebanon during the second week of October this year. Revd. Etienne van Blerk and Rachael Varney were also part of the team. Rachael was also on the team for the Foreign Office work in 2019 and now works as Bishop Philip's senior executive assistant. She is no stranger to overseas church visits having previously been a World Church Officer for the Methodist Church. Revd. Etienne van Blerk is also a member of the Truro Diocese International Links committee. He is the current incumbent of Lelant and Carbis Bay, a former missionary to Lebanon and a fluent Arabic speaker.

Planning for this started in 2019, but multiple postponements were needed because of Covid travel restrictions. There was also concern that the visit should not be a complication for people under a much more severe cost of living crisis than our own. But Bishop Philip was assured that it would be 'incarnational' for the visit to go ahead and reassure the Christians there that their plight was not forgotten. It was also a chance for the rebuilding work after the August 2020 explosion in the port area of Beirut, to which Christians in Truro diocese had contributed, to be viewed.

Bishop Philip and team climbed aboard the sleeper train to Paddington at the end of Sunday 9th October and then took a direct flight from Heathrow to Beirut the following day (Monday), landing in the evening. Work commenced early the next morning (Tuesday) with an 8am meeting at the offices of the Lebanon Bible Society with their Director and the Alpha course co-ordinator for the Levant (includes neighbouring Arab countries as well). They had both been very helpful in setting up meetings for Bishop Philip and team as both have a ministry that cuts across all denominations.

A hectic round of individual daytime meetings with church leaders followed, from an audience with Maronite Patriarch Rai (head of the largest Christian denomination in Lebanon, effectively a local Pope) through two Greek Catholic (Melkite) Archbishops to various protestant denominations (Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical). Church schools were visited, one of them requiring a 7am start with Bishop Philip first speaking at staff prayers, then at assembly sessions for two different age groups in a packed school chapel. An openly Christian school, but with 85% of its pupils coming from a Muslim background and with a waiting list of Muslim parents wanting to send their children there.

Visits also covered church support projects for Syrian refugees (who now make up a third of Lebanon's population), which included a Christian school for refugee children which started off by the children being befriended by a local Christian couple who gave classes under the trees in an olive grove and progressed via a Bedouin tent to adapting the homes of two schoolteachers to cater for 350 children, mostly having lost one or both parents. Projects seeking to promote greater

understanding and reconciliation between the 18 state recognised religious denominations were also visited, especially through raising awareness of others as equal in God's sight in the young people.

In the evenings there were two events gathering larger numbers of Christian and Muslim leaders on the theme of the importance of religious freedom, including the freedom to change one's religion, building on the foundation of Lebanon being the only country in the Middle East where full freedom of religion or belief, as recognised by the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is observed. On the Tuesday evening of the visit a welcome reception for Bishop Philip's visit was hosted by the British Ambassador at his Residence and on the Thursday evening Bishop Philip gave a lecture and answered questions, again from both Christian and Muslim leaders, at one of the leading Universities of Beirut which was well attended and livestreamed. He started his talk with greetings in French recognising the culture of the University as a francophone institution inherited from the days when Lebanon was a French Protectorate. (and situated opposite the French Embassy).

A very vivid illustration of the country's economic plight came when the team used a little local currency. It felt odd to have a £100,000 note in your pocket, but very sad to know that it would only stretch to two or three coffees at Starbucks.

The team set out to encourage our Christian brothers and sisters in Lebanon, but found ourselves being as much encouraged by them in their ability to stand for love of God and neighbour in times of such adversity, including caring for so many refugees from a country which was very recently the enemy when Syrian troops occupied Lebanon for thirty years up until 2005.

You can read more about the visit at www.trurodiocese.org.uk/bishops-blog