

Kharma, Issa

(1932–1997)

SVEN HAGEN JENSEN

Sven Hagen Jensen, M.Div. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, USA) has worked for the church for over 50 years as a pastor, editor, departmental director, and church administrator in Denmark, Nigeria and the Middle East. Jensen enjoys reading, writing, nature and gardening. He is married to Ingelis and has two adult children and four grandchildren.

Issa George Kharma was an Adventist educator with a pastoral touch. His high standards as well as his kind and constructive guidance inspired many young people, and his name became closely connected with Adventist elementary and secondary education in Lebanon.¹

Early Life

Born in 1932 in Dweirtaha, Syria, to George and Youmna Yacoub who belonged to the Christian

Orthodox faith, Kharma was the middle of three children with a sister, Catherine, and brother Ghnatous. Kharma's father immigrated along with his two uncles to Guadeloupe in the Caribbean in hopes of securing a better life for his family, but died there in 1955, never having returned even once to see them. Unfortunately, Kharma's mother died in a car accident in 1977 at the beginning of the Lebanese War. His sister and brother still live in Syria to this day (2022).²

Youmna's dream was for Kharma to become a priest. However, a misunderstanding between her and the local bishop regarding payment for his priestly robes changed the course of his life. Discouraged, his mother dissuaded him from following a priestly career. In retrospect, Kharma felt that it was the best thing that could have happened, because a chain of events led him to reconnect with some of his relatives who helped him discover the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Kharma and his friend Youssif Al Azrak graduated from Tartous Secondary School and both of them, having gained a new understanding about God, were baptized into the Adventist Church in 1951.³



Issa Kharma, c. 1986.

Photo courtesy of Suhad Kharma.

The following year, Kharma moved to Lebanon and enrolled in Middle East College, situated on Sabtieh Hill in East Beirut. He studied there from 1952-1959. The years spent at the college further strengthened his faith and gave him a new perspective on his life and future. It became to him a new home where he daily had the opportunity to meet new people from around the world, who were eager to share their testimonies about Jesus Christ. After graduation, he began working as a clerk at the East Mediterranean Union office located near to the college.⁴

Teacher and Principal

Kharma's calling, however, was teaching, and he received his first assignment at the Beirut Arabic School (currently Adventist School Mouseitbeh)⁵ in West Beirut, where he taught 1957-1959. The mission then sent him to teach in Aramoun (a village in the Chouf area just south of Beirut) where an Adventist community had taken form with their growing number of children.^{6 7} The leadership of the Lebanon-Syria Mission had begun an elementary school there in a rented building during the mid-1940s. The members also held their weekly religious services in the school until 1958, when a new school building was constructed with a spacious hall that could also be used for church services. Kharma was a teacher there 1960-1961 and cultivated many friendships that endured for years.⁸

In 1962 the local Adventist mission sent him back to the Beirut Arabic School where he served his first term as principal (1962-1966). It had started in 1929 as an elementary school in a predominantly Muslim area. During the years he was there it offered the intermediate level as well. During that time Kharma got married on December 23, 1963, to Rose Ibrahim Touma, a second-generation Adventist. They had two children, Suhad and Mark.^{9 10}

In 1966 Kharma became principal of the Bishmezzine Adventist School located in the village of Bishmezzine in El-Koura, North Lebanon. Established in 1952, it had offered the intermediate level since 1960. When he arrived in 1966 the enrollment was around 30 students. By 1971 it had increased to 220.

The Bishmezzine years were fruitful in the spiritual, academic, and personal areas of Kharma's life.¹¹ The Adventist schools in Lebanon in general showed high academic standards. In 1966, 60 percent of the students passed the government certificate examinations, which contrasted favorably with the 20 percent success shown by other schools.¹² In the Bishmezzine Adventist School, under Kharma's leadership, the 16 students who sat for the examinations in 1970 all passed with nearly perfect scores.¹³ One writer has noted that "the school has provided Christian education for our children and produced many workers for the church."¹⁴ Such achievements partly resulted from Kharma's efforts and example.

Kharma went to Andrews University, Michigan, U.S.A., in 1971, where he earned an M.A. in school administration. When he returned to Lebanon, church leadership appointed him principal of Middle East Secondary School (MESS) in Bouchrieh, Jdeidet El Matn.¹⁵ In 1972 the name changed to Bouchrieh Adventist

Secondary School (BASS).¹⁶

Three years later civil war broke out in Lebanon and lasted 1975-1990. Those years became some of the most challenging years for Kharma as a school administrator. Many people from the neighborhood sought shelter from the bombs in the underground auditorium of the school. Up to 70 families with more than 400 members would camp out for days during periods of heavy shelling. Some families remained for up to two years. Teachers from the school and staff from Middle East Division provided food, water, and clothing for those who lost their homes and possessions.¹⁷

A large number of people in the area felt compelled to immigrate in order to escape the devastation of their war-torn country. It affected student enrolment, teaching opportunities, and the operation and economy of the school. Toward the end of the war church leaders asked Kharma to take over as principal of the Mouseitbeh Adventist Secondary School (MASS) in West Beirut as well. But that brought its own set of challenges, when he had to run two schools and travel through the lines of demarcation between the two sections of the city. MASS was a prosperous school and at one point during his leadership had an enrolment of more than 1,000 students. The main subjects that he taught in addition to his administrative duties were mathematics, civics, and Bible. Kharma remained as principal for both secondary schools until his untimely death in 1997.¹⁸

Other Responsibilities

In addition to being a teacher and principal, he also carried responsibilities for the East Mediterranean Field (EMF), Middle East College (instructor in education), and his local church in Bouchrieh. He was a member on the EMF board during two periods (1972-1977 and 1984-1997) and served as education director for the field 1972-1977 and again 1988-1991. In addition, he was public relations and religious liberty director 1996-1997 and a member of the Legal Association of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lebanon.¹⁹ In the 1990s he served on the board of directors as well as the board of management of Middle East College.²⁰ He was an elder in the Bouchrieh Seventh-day Adventist Church for many years until his death on October 9, 1997.²¹

Legacy

Kharma cared for his teachers. He radiated a natural authority that led some to approach him with a sense of awe and respect. One young woman who had just begun to teach at BASS and was having challenge in controlling her students, remembers how she got called to his office one day and how her "stomach flipped and then balled into a knot." Thinking like a student, she worried, "Being called into the principal's office is never a good thing! Oh dear, maybe he is going to fire me." As it turned out, he encouraged and helped her with her classes, offering to step in should trouble arise in the classroom.²²

His former students and teachers report the following characteristics of Issa Kharma: "He was an educational Adventist leader, an expert in school leadership with an awareness of all mini and macro details. In instrumental procedures he was always ready to assist, guide and lead by example. In lesson planning he was a partner with the teachers in their training, helping them to create a unified work plan. In communication with parents, teachers and students, Mr. Issa was a professional listener, thinker, solution provider, and above all else an Adventist role model in leadership. The Bible and Ellen G. White were always the guides during worship meetings. Issa Kharma was a visionary. He knew how to invest in today to save tomorrow."²³ Another of his young teachers added: "Through his guidance for me as a young teacher, I realized his keen desire to develop young Adventist leaders for the future ... He made sure to encourage me at all times and compliment the good work I did."²⁴

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Unpublished paper written by Suhad Kharma about her father Issa Kharma, in her possession, received by Farid Khoury, November 11, 2019; Suhad Kharma to Sven H. Jensen, by email, beginning of December 2021. Much of the information for this article is taken from this paper.

2. Kharma, 1.
3. Ibid., 2.
4. Ibid.
5. Later to become Adventist School Mouseitbeh.
6. Kharma, 2.
7. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, October 1, 1959, 6.
8. Manoug H. Nazirian, *The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Lebanon 1897-1997* (Beirut, Lebanon: The East Mediterranean Field of Seventh-day Adventists, 1999), 21-23.
9. Ibid., 2, 3.
10. Ibid., 47.
11. Kharma, 3.
12. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, July 1, 1966, 8, 9.
13. "From Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, July-August 1970, 8.
14. Nazirian, 35.
15. Kharma, 3.
16. Jimmy Choufani and Melanie Wixwat, "Adventist School Bouchrieh," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, accessed January 20, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=4DYS>.
17. Ibid.
18. Kharma, 4.
19. *Seventh-day Adventist Online Yearbook*, "East Mediterranean Field," accessed January 20, 2022, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.
20. Middle East College Board of Directors Minutes, December 3, 1996, and Middle East College Board of Management Minutes, January 21, 1997, Middle East University Archives.

21. Suhad Kharma to Sven Jensen, by email, December 7, 2021.

22. Nancy Meyer Schafner, *Cross the Waves and Climb the Steeps: The Meyer Family Missionary Adventures* (Bloomington, IN: LifeRich Publishing, May 2021), chapter 33.

23. Elias Choufani to Sven Jensen by email, December 6, 2021. Choufani is currently (2022) principal of Adventist School Mouseitbeh.

24. John Issa to Sven Jensen, by email December 15, 2021. Issa is a current (2022) assistant professor at Middle East University.

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