

**EVS** Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools

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### A NEW REALITY

- 2 Love and then do what you want! Reflection
- 4 Waiting for a liberating word Relationships with people in the Middle East
- 6 A longing for the sublime Concert and reception celebrating the inauguration of the organ in Amman
- 9 An important trip at a difficult time Six days in Jordan with plenty of time for talks at the Schneller School
- 13 "I don't want to travel to this country..." Or maybe you do... ... and now more than ever?!!
- 16 When courageous people tell their story Digital tours to Israel and Palestine
- 20 A dozen monuments a day How the Lebanese discover their homeland as a holiday destination
- 22 Romania instead of Beirut Why the SiMO study programme had to leave Lebanon

### SCHNELLER NEWS

- 24 When students praise their school Plenty of good news from the Johann Ludwig Schneller School
- **READERS' LETTERS**
- 27 Re.: Schneller Magazine 1-2024: The bond of peace; Obituary

Cover: Girls from the boarding school of the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. Photo: Buck/EMS Back cover: Boys from the boarding school of the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. Photo: Buck/EMS

### Dear Reader,

is it still a viable proposition to travel and meet people in the countries of the Middle East after the terrorist attack on 7th October and the resulting, seemingly interminable war in Gaza, after Iranian missiles were launched against Israel and Israeli military operations were conducted in several neighbouring countries? Is this still possible in view of various travel warnings and the all too real danger of a military conflagration in the Middle East?



Despite all this, an EVS tour group visited the Kingdom of Jordan in April (which has issued no travel warning!). In this issue, my colleague Katja Dorothea Buck writes in detail about this – as well as the enchanting organ concert that instigated the visit. Seasoned organisers of encounter tours such as Georg Roessler (Jerusalem) and Christoph Dinkelaker (Berlin) also have their say on this subject. Finally, Renate Ellmenreich, pastor of the German-speaking congregation in Beirut, contributes her perspective in a country where the crisis has been particularly devastating. Due to this crisis, the EMS study programme in Lebanon had to undertake its very own "trip" to Romania – which Jan Jakob Bergmann shares with us.

This much is clear: it will probably take a long time before trips to Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, i.e. to the various regions of the "Holy Land", return to the way they once were. Nevertheless, encounters are still possible in one way or another. They need more creativity, a greater degree of frustration tolerance and even more intensive listening to one another than before. But perhaps this is precisely what makes them more intense.

This issue will also give you an insight into current developments at the Schneller schools, the Middle East, new projects and encounters.

On behalf of the editorial team I wish you an inspiring read.

Uwe forte

Best regards, Uwe Gräbe, Pastor

# Love and then do what you want!

e Protestants strive to be a "church of freedom". Martin Luther, the reformer, is concerned with the "Freedom of a Christian". St Paul the Apostle is the key witness to "the freedom of the glory of the children of God" to which we are called. (Romans 8:21)

Of course, freedom is never limited to any one denomination. The fact that Jesus Christ liberated us from sin and death is a core belief of the Christian faith and part of the ecumenical consensus – and actually produces many happy, free people. Thank God!

I'm allowed to do everything. By no means does this imply "anything goes" – because not everything serves a good purpose. But where and what are the limits?

This cannot be a general call for moderation, a mere "don't overdo things". A few pages later in his epistle to the church in Corinth, Paul writes his high song of love (1 Cor 13). He states very clearly: faith, hope and love do not tolerate appeals to moderation but represent a rich, fulfilled life.

St Paul does not intend to place restrictions on the promised freedom immediately. After all, we are not as free as we would like to be. When the East Germans achieved a peaceful revolution in 1989, they were finally free to travel. The whole world was open to them – if they had the wherewithal to do so. And if they were healthy enough. And if they didn't have to look after somebody. Seen in this light, freedom is a pipe dream. Anyone who thinks they are completely free to make their own decisions has failed to understand anything about all the things that shape and define us. We're not as free as we imagine.

But we're allowed to do anything. The apostle writes that we Christians are saints. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which resides in Jesus Christ

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.

> 1 Corinthians 6:12 (Watchword for May 2024)

our Lord, he says at another point. We belong to God and should be fully conscious of this: "Do you not know that we are to judge angels?" (1 Cor 6:3) Our faith entrusts us with a great deal. God believes in us much more than we believe in him. I'm allowed to do everything!

So let me ask you again: Where and what are the limits? The apostle teaches me that love should be my yardstick and guiding principle. The boundless love that I live by also shows me my limits. After all, love serves a good purpose. To put it bluntly, this means if I do something out of love, it is right.

St Augustine, the Church Father, interpreted the Bible in exactly the same way. He wrote, "Dilige et fac quod vis" – Love and then do what you want! This guiding principle is good enough for our human life. What I do out of a lack of love is not beneficial for others and not good for me. It does not serve a good purpose.

In Jerusalem where I live, grief, worries, hardship and hopelessness now have even more power over people than usual. The misery of these days doesn't need to be described here, it has been dominating the news for months. I am currently experiencing just how much people are controlled by external sources. Whenever I greet my grocer in the old town with the question "How are you?", he always replied with the usual "alhamdulillah", which means something like "Good, thank God". Sometimes he now just says "I survive" - I'm still alive. Souls are overshadowed by so much misery. Of course it is good and right to be sad if there is reason to be, and God knows there is plenty of that.

"Nothing shall have power over me" – that sounds like a pious but helpless wish at the moment. And I understand Paul's wish that we should not allow ourselves to be controlled by external forces. At least not by letting myself drive out faith, hope and love and giving others power over me. It is bad enough that others make our lives miserable without us being able to control or prevent it. One last thing. I believe that Paul's statement "I'm allowed to do everything" can also create a healthy distance between us and our own worries. Here's a case in point: "First direct flights from Tehran to Jerusalem since 1979" was posted on social media the day after the Iranian missile attack on Israel. Is this cold-blooded sarcasm, stupid pranking about or sardonic black humour? St Paul would ask, does it serve a good purpose? Nothing shall have power over me, not even the urge to ridicule everything. But if it leads to liberated and liberating laughter, it is a balm for troubled, wounded souls.

That's exactly how I felt about it myself. It serves a good purpose so it's not unloving; it's allowed. Many years ago, Hanns Dieter Hüsch, the devout German cabaret artist from the Lower Rhine, concluded his psalm with good words "Ich bin vergnügt, erlöst, befreit (I am happy, redeemed, liberated)".

What makes me so carefree and no sadness weighs me down? Because my God teaches me to laugh about the whole world.

Joachim Lenz, provost in Jerusalem

# Waiting for a liberating word

Relationships with people in the Middle East

Seven months after the 7th of October that changed everything to do with our relationships with partners in the Middle East, it feels as if we are tentatively feeling our way towards one another. How does the other party react when someone brings up seemingly incidental words such as "genocide" or "pogrom" in a conversation? Are they on the right side, on my side?

You broke off our church fellowship a while ago." This is how I still remember the sad assessment of a Palestinian colleague from Jordan last November when he reproached me for the extent to which German church leaders had unilaterally sided with Israel. Within the ecumenical movement, there is probably no more serious offence than a breach in church communion. Even now, at the beginning of May, anything like a healing in relationships is probably still a long way off – even though we are visiting each other again and making cautious attempts at reaching out to one another.

On a business trip that took me to Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel, the

impression kept growing stronger from one conversation to the next - that there are people everywhere who are waiting for a liberating word from the ones they suspect to stand on the opposite side. A word that makes it credible that, for the person who utters it, Palestinian life is just as valuable as any other person's life. That the tens of thousands of dead, the hundreds of thousands of wounded, the traumatised and the homeless are not simply wiped off the slate. But on the other hand - a word that specifically addresses the many Israeli victims of rape and abduction and does not simply allow them to be swallowed in virtually anonymous "sympathy for the suffering on all sides". We have indeed learnt in other contexts that rape victims should be taken seriously, believed and, above all, that what they have experienced should not be downplayed.

"I have lost everything – my voice, my abilities, my desire to work for a better world, my faith," writes an Israeli acquaintance of mine who has spent decades campaigning for the rights of Palestinian Christians. Since then, none of her partners from this campaign has taken her in



their arms to hug her and ask her what her own family experienced on 7th October. Not a single one.

"But all those decades of occupation...", says a colleague in Lebanon to me when I tell her about my Israeli acquaintance. "But there are now many more victims on the Palestinian side..." – as if one person's suffering could outweigh or even undo another's suffering. "Don't you know that the stories about alleged rape victims are pure Zionist propaganda?" explains a good friend in Jordan, a renowned Palestinian academic. He immediately refers me to a website where I can read the evidence for his statement. He claims not to have heard anything about the UN report that finally acknowledged the sexual violence five long months after October 7.

"But Hamas...," is what I hear from numerous Israeli friends when I mention the devastation in Gaza. As if this would ever justify a war in which an entire region is virtually pulverised to the ground so that the Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar can be paraded in a glass cage in court at some possible time in the future, just like Adolf Eichmann once was. However, it is precisely the trauma associated with the latter's name that has been reawakened in many Israelis as a result of the terror of the 7th of October. And that is why we should listen carefully when Israelis speak of a pogrom. But we should also listen just as carefully when Palestinian brothers and sisters are struggling to understand what has been happening since 7th October in any other terms than a continuation of the trauma that originated with the Nakba in 1948.

Whenever you meet people from countries in the Middle East, it is impossible to avoid the traumas suffered on all sides. Presumably, it will therefore take an agonisingly long time before one side can speak a liberating word to the other. So for the time being, it remains the visitor's duty to keep on listening and to at least try to speak a liberating word on their behalf – even if that means stammering something entirely provisional.

Uwe Gräbe

Directly next to the Theodor Schneller School in Amman: the so-called Hittin Camp, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live. Many of the children and staff at the school come from there. They are all severely affected by the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.



# A longing for the sublime

Concert and reception celebrating the inauguration of the organ in Amman

What has now come to a satisfactory conclusion took place in a way that is as bizarre as it is historic: transporting an organ with 17 stops from Wendlingen am Neckar in Germany to Jordan and reassembling it in the Christ Church at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman. The instrument was inaugurated during a liturgical concert on 21 April 2024.

usic for Peace" was the title of the concert programme written by church musician Klaus Schulten. He selected works by Buxtehude, Frescobaldi. Sweelinck and Bach for the second inauguration of the Weigle/Bornefeld organ in Amman and introduced the audience with the many different timbres of the organ's sound. Perhaps the organ may sound even better than it did at its original location. the former St John's Church in Wendlingen. This is pure conjecture but there is a lot to be said for it. "The organ in Amman is perfectly positioned in the church and its sound fills the space very well," says Klaus Schulten, who never played the organ in Wendlingen but is now full of enthusiasm for it in its new location.

Historically, it also fits the church perfectly, he adds. It was built in 1968 so it dates back to the time when the TSS first opened its doors. Schulten is also convinced that Hermann Schneller would have been delighted with the organ. Schneller was the director of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem until 1940. After the Orphanage was expropriated in the 1950s, he founded the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon and, together with his brother Ernst, the TSS in Amman in 1959. No-one knows more about Hermann Schneller's passion for organs than Schulten. His book "Orgeln im Nahen Osten – Das Syrische Waisenhaus Jerusalem und seine Orgeln im Spiegel der Zeit" (Organs in the Middle East – The Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem and its Organs in the Mirror of Time) was recently published by the Verlag für Mission und Ökumene in Erlangen (see SM 4-2023).

"The Syrian Orphanage housed the largest organ of its time in the Middle East," he says. "Hermann Schneller played very well himself and knew a lot about organs." Schneller had designed the churches at the succeeding schools in Lebanon and Jordan so that they would have space for an organ. However, there was always a lack of money to buy one.

Almost 60 years later, a historically unique opportunity arose. The parish of St John in Wendlingen no longer needed its organ because the church was to be demolished to make way for a modern community centre. At a height of 7.80 metres, the instrument was difficult to sell to other parishes. In Amman, however, the church is high enough to within a centimetre, and there was great interest in obtaining an organ. It was clear that transportation and reassembly would be expensive. But we assumed there would be enough people willing to donate to such a project and fortunately this proved to be the case. The names of all those who donated over €250 are now engraved on the side wall of the organ for posterity.



When the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, Hosam Naoum, and Reverend Khaled Freij entered the packed church that Sunday evening at the end of April accompanied by Buxtehude's chorale prelude "Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist" (Now we pray to the Holy Spirit), a divine shiver must have run down the spine of many people. This amazing project which had faced many hurdles and setbacks had actually been completed successfully! After all, an organ is not a simple recorder that you just carry from A to B. Just over a year ago, it had been lying in all its component parts in an old sports hall in Wend-



The musician and the liturgists: Rev. Khaled Freij, Klaus Schulten and Archbishop Hosam Naoum (from I. to r.)

The Weigle/Bornefeld organ is positioned in the middle of the side wall of the Christ Church and fills the room with its sound.

lingen's industrial estate. A sad heap of scrap in the eyes of those who don't know anything about organs.

But thankfully there are people who do. And one of them, besides Klaus Schulten, is the Saarbrücken organ builder Gerhard Walcker-Mayer. He had taken a look at the jumble of pipes, wind chests, bellows and organ parts and soon realised that everything was still there and could be worth reassembling elsewhere.

It took him and his son Alexander a good two weeks to pack all the bits and pieces into a container so that they could be transported by ship to Jordan. Once they arrived in Jordan, it took them another three months to reassemble everything to form a complete instrument. And now there it is in the Christ Church in Amman – the Weigle/Bornefeld organ with its 17 stops. It was played for the first time on 12 November 2023 in a simulcast service between Amman and Wendlingen at the General Meeting of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS).

However, everyone involved soon realised that an instrument of this kind also needed to be formally inaugurated in a concert. And at the same time, they realised this would be a historic opportunity to build bridges between Germany and Jordan. The EVS also wanted to use the official inauguration of the organ to invite those who were interested to go on a short trip to Jordan. But when the 7th of October completely reshuffled the cards in the Middle East, all the plans were already so far advanced that there was no turning



The TSS school choir directed by Qamar Badwan sang at the reception after the organ concert.

back – thank goodness. After all, nobody would probably dare to transport an organ to the Middle East at a time like this.

In fact, the inauguration concert presented a wonderful opportunity to pray together for much desired peace in the region. The people of Gaza and the Holy Land were included in the intercessions and the millennia-old longing for peace and justice was expressed in Psalms 42, 43 and 85. Add to that the fact that a diverse mix of Jordanians, Palestinians and Germans came together to pray for peace in word and song was so much more than just symbolic.

Of course, the question begs to be asked why a 17-stop organ is needed in Jordan, a country with no great organ tradition and no trained organists. Couldn't the money it took to transport and reassemble the organ have been used for something else? Yes, of course it could. But one thing that became obvious at the ceremonial concert was that an organ is more than just an instrument that you play or not. Above all, an organ is the musical expression of the longing for the sublime, for an eternity that transcends time and space. There is a very good reason why it is called the queen of instruments.

And if you take this idea a step further, then you can also draw a line to Schneller's work. What could be more sublime than to offer children who would otherwise have few prospects a place where they can grow up in a good and safe environment, where they can unfold to their full potential and where the focus is on human dignity and kindness.

Just how brilliantly this approach is implemented at the Schneller School was once again demonstrated by the TSS school choir under the direction of Qamar Badwan at the reception that followed. The musical abilities that the singer and music teacher has taught the children at the Schneller School in just two years is something that deserves admiration and respect. The choir is now regarded as one of the best in Amman.

At the subsequent awards ceremony, the children were not left empty-handed. While the adults like Qamar Badwan, Khaled Freij and Archbishop Hosam Naoum were presented with the silver Schneller dove by Uwe Gräbe, EVS Executive Secretary, and Klaus Schulten received the golden Schneller dove, the children from the school were presented with several bags of sweets that the tour group had brought with them from Germany in recognition and appreciation of the children. Indeed, one thing became abundantly clear at the grand festival: children are the heart of Schneller's work and they are the future of the country.

Katja Dorothea Buck

# An important trip at a difficult time

Six days in Jordan with plenty of time for talks at the Schneller School

Twenty men and women from Germany travelled to Jordan for the inauguration of the organ in Amman. In addition to the many tourist highlights, the main focus of the six-day itinerary was the work at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS). And it certainly left an impression on them.

Tuesday evening at the Dead Sea. The group had spent the last six days travelling through Jordan and is now sitting on a hotel terrace under a full moon and in balmy temperatures, talking amongst themselves about their trip. The 20 men and women had visited Amman, Jerash, Madaba, Mount Nebo, the site of the Baptism on the River Jordan and, of course, the legendary Petra. The next morning, they were due to return to Germany. Each of them briefly names their personal highlight of the trip.

Jordan certainly has a lot to offer tourists. But what the members of the group mention the most was the work at the Schneller School. The group spent four nights in the TSS guest house, went on outings from there, attended the inauguration of the organ and spent a whole day visiting the entire school, from the day school to the kindergarten, the boarding home and the workshops. Obviously, it had all left a great impression on them. "I was most impressed by the chil-

Outstanding performance in the training bakery: mini pizzas for the evening reception at the inauguration of the organ. dren in the boarding home, the way they played happily outside when they had finished school in the afternoon. And how the educators joined in. That's exactly how it should be," says one of the group.

Someone else remembers the visit to the day school where Reverend Khaled Freij, director of the entire institution, together with Khaleda Massarweh, headmistress of the school, explained to the guests the work in the classes and the educational focus. They were allowed to sit in on German lessons and attend the Science Lab where natural sciences are taught.

A student from the upper grade, which leads to a higher secondary qualification, explained in fluent English what they could do with their qualification later; and the guests were introduced to the work in the special needs class, where children with learning difficulties are taught in small groups. "It's remarkable how friendly and respectful everyone at the school is towards each other."

says a retired teacher who knows all too well the challenges of everyday school life and how important a good environment is for learning.

Another member of the group recalls the visit to the

recently opened training bakery, where young women have been learning the baking and confectionery trade for several months. "What they achieve there is incredible. Many bakeries can't compete with that." At the reception for the inauguration of the organ, the guests from Germany were able to taste for themselves the mini pizzas, spiced breads, party rolls and petits fours which were all baked at the training bakery. One woman added that many professional caterers would be unable to compete with what the TSS had done at this reception.

Not to mention the vocational training department at the Schneller school. One member of the tour party remembered a scene in the training workshop for car electrics and hybrid drives. A young man and his instructor had been studying the engine electronics data of a car and both had been looking at the screen very intently. "When I looked back five minutes later, the two of them were still bent over the results of the data with great concentration. The calmness and earnestness with which knowledge is passed on there is very impressive," she says.

In the carpentry workshop, two young women attracted the group's interest. After they had completed their studies, one in nursing and the other in administration, the two sisters, aged 24 and 26, decided to do an apprenticeship in carpentry. They are now learning how to work with wood at the TSS. Their parents are very happy about this decision. They have five





The two women want to become carpenters and already have an idea how they want to set up their own business.

girls at home. They already do a lot themselves anyway – from growing vegetables and making furniture to doing repairs and installing things about the house. They simply love wood as a material and later wanted to start their own business as carpenters.

The two young women already have a business idea in mind – they intend to use





Tug of war in the afternoon. Playing together is not neglected at the boarding home.

Khaled Freij explains the educational concept of Schneller work to the guests from Germany: The children need to be reassured they will be treated with dignity and respect.

waste wood from pallets to make unique items of furniture with that certain special extra; they even demonstrated a rocking bench they had designed and built together with their trainer Issa Najjar. The guests from Germany were invited to try it out. Quite a few of them said later they would love to order a bench like this for their own garden straight away. "I didn't expect to see two young women learning a predominantly male craft in the school's carpentry workshop. And they have such precise ideas about what they want to do with it later on. That's simply fantastic," says one of the tour group.

Another thing became clear during the wrap-up session on the hotel patio: It was definitely out of the ordinary to fly to the Middle East at a time like this. Just a



The King's Wall in Petra with its tombs carved out of the rock. The ruins of the ancient rock city are a World Heritage Site and are probably the most frequently visited tourist destination in Jordan.

few days before the outward flight, Iran had attacked Israel with hundreds of missiles and during the trip itself, the Israeli side had retaliated. The group took it all in their stride, partly because the group members had got on so well together. But they also realised the importance of such a trip, especially at this time.



The fact that the group travelled to the Middle East despite everything was more important than ever.

This was again clearly revealed during a conversation with teachers and educators at the TSS. Before the 7th of October, Germany had a very good public image in the region. However, the German government's unequivocal position on Israel's war against Hamas had significantly tarnished this image. Germans are now met with great scepticism. This also applies to the staff at the TSS who are directly or indirectly affected by the untold suffering in Gaza. "We can't believe what's happening," said one teacher. "Every day, the children at school watch the media and see how innocent children are dying in Gaza. How are we supposed to deal with that?" she added. A member of the group then asked the translator: "Can you please tell them that we feel the same way, that we are just as stunned?" Then the teachers and educators listened carefully to what was being translated. Their answer: "We all just want one thing: peace, security and life. We are all brothers and sisters."

Katja Dorothea Buck

# "I don't want to travel to this country..."

There are many reasons not to travel to the Holy Land at the present time. But despite everything that has happened, there is no other place in the world where so much hope is being generated and experienced right now as in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Georg Roessler believes that sharing in this great hope can be important for each and every one of us.

Indeed, there is nothing in the Holy Land that we could not find bigger, more impressive and, above all, more affordable elsewhere. It is also abundantly clear that after 7 October 2023, the appeal of travelling to Israel and the Palestinian territories as a relaxing holiday destination seems almost non-existent. Which basically it never was. La mer, la plage, the holy sites and the "city that never sleeps" may have had their own appeal before but even that has pretty much dissipated into thin air due to the heightened level of bomb threats since 7 October.

However, for those in the know, the personal safety of travelling in Israel and the Palestinian territories, even in times of local crisis, has never been an issue – the risk of getting injured while scooping hummus or getting run over by the homicidal traffic behaviour of Israelis and Palestinians has always been far greater than being hit by a Hamas rocket. Once the present immediate acts of war between Hamas and Israel are behind us, everything should actually be the same as before!

But it won't. A statement of "I don't want to travel to this country" can be un-

derstood as a political or moral stance, not only towards the Holy Land itself, but also towards a number of other travel destinations. Morally, because we may feel embarrassed about having a good time in a place where the people around us are suffering from the consequences of war or environmental disasters. A delicious pizza just doesn't taste as good when a hungry child is begging us with wide pleading eyes.

On the other hand, one can easily imagine that this would be akin to a protest against a holiday destination whose poli-

# Or maybe you do...

tics or political structures we reject – and we want to express this by refusing to travel there.

But both of these attitudes can also be considered the other way round. After a terrible earthquake, a horrific tsunami or a military conflict, the local people must feel doubly punished if, on top of all their misfortune, they are then left to fend for



Experience the things that don't make the headlines: encounters make this possible.

themselves. Perhaps income from tourism is essential for their existence more than ever before.

In the Holy Land, for example, this is particularly true for the Palestinian economy – visitors from abroad account for more than a third (!) of their gross nation-

## ... and now more than ever?!!

al product. For Israel on the other hand, this figure is less than 3%, making tourism relatively unimportant, at least as an economic factor.

We must also ask ourselves how far people can be held responsible for the autocratic structures in their country or political crimes committed by their governments. The autocrats couldn't care less about our refusal; our absence only penalises the local population.

In the end, the decisive factor arises from our own personal reasons for not travelling to this or that destination. It shouldn't be explained in terms of moral or political issues – we simply don't want to!

What are the reasons today despite the turmoil caused by 7 October 2023 – perhaps more so than ever before – that speak in favour of meeting people and travelling in the often so unholy and nonetheless "Holy" Land?

The Holy Land and its prophets have perhaps given the world the greatest revolution ever in the consciousness of human Encounters with people who do not give up hope, despite everything, are a great source of enrichment.



history: hope! Compared to the "circular" world view of antiquity in which "nothing new happens under the sun", where the gods were seen as poor custodians of a world structure without any prospects, we hear the visionary voice of the prophets of Israel. Indeed, the world is bad, but it is not meant to remain so if God's will has anything to do with it! One day – perhaps in the distant future – swords will be beaten into ploughshares and we will all be part of a linear historical evolution on the way to a better, perfect world, a heavenly Jerusalem on this Earth.



Complicated terms such as apocalypse and eschatology attempt to describe a very general basic human experience. Our conflicts as human beings are driving us against the wall, leading us into utter despair and an apparent lack of prospects. But beyond all that, a new world awaits us, a future and hitherto unimagined possibilities for a new way of living together!

This concept of hope and a future after the crisis and apocalypse focus on and in the Holy Land, both biblically and in terms of day-to-day politics. Indeed, people in the Holy Land are repeatedly and almost daily generating new ideas, institutions, communities and organisations that are committed to a better future – "Seeds of Hope"! – against all odds and apparently contrary to one's common sense with all its scepticism and resignation. There is no other place in this world where so much hope is generated and experienced!

This does not mean that our duty lies in securing the economic future of people in Israel and the Palestinian Territories by travelling there. But we all live in hope.

And it could be important for us to share in the great hope that is generated by special people in this often so unholy Holy Land. It could be a great experience for us in our own often unholy world to encounter these people and experience this hope for ourselves.

Instilling hope, recharging with hope. This has always been the case and today more so than ever!

Georg Roessler has lived in Jerusalem since 1988. He is co-founder of "Matzmichim – The Israel Violence Reduction Organization (www.matzmichim.org.il), of SK-Tours in Nature (www.sktours.net) and of the projects "Fair Travel"in Israel and the Palestinian Autonomous Territories and the "Jerusalem Way".

# When courageous people tell their story

**Digital tours to Israel and Palestine** 

The Berlin-based tour operator Alsharq specialises in political study trips to countries in the Middle East. The 7th of October hit the tourist industry in this region very hard. Alsharq is more in demand than ever before in educational work in Germany, especially when it comes to the topic of Israel and Palestine, says Christoph Dinkelaker, co-founder of Alsharq..

### To what extent has your work as a tour operator changed since 7th October?

The 7th of October was a real disaster for us. There was a complete collapse in our tour packages to Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. Overall, demand for trips to the region, for example to Jordan or Iraqi Kurdistan, has dropped dramatically.

#### How did you respond to this?

It's not the first time that tour packages to the Middle East have suddenly collapsed due to a political crisis. We therefore regard ourselves as a kind of regulator. When tours to the region are no longer possible, it is all the more important that we strengthen educational work here at home. I visit schools, universities and ministries several times a week to provide information about the situation in the Middle East.

### You already switched to virtual events during the coronavirus pandemic. What is a virtual tour like?

COVID-19 was also a major setback. It hit our core business as a tour operator.

We therefore started offering virtual trips via Zoom, picking people up from their sofa or desk, so to speak, and connecting them with local people at the destination. Above all, we designed trips in regions that are not easy to travel to, such as Gaza, Syria or Afghanistan. Our on-site partners then go with us to interesting places and use their mobile phones to show us what there is to see and tell us what life and daily routines are like in the region.

# How much interest is there in virtual events of this type?

We still offer events of this type on demand. For example, for associations that work with refugees from Afghanistan or for schools. All in all, this has opened up new target groups for us. People with limited mobility and older people in particular can learn about new countries. As well as people whose schedules don't allow them to travel with us in person for ten days or two weeks. They appreciate it when we take them somewhere else virtually on two afternoons, for example.

### Have you changed the contents of your events in Israel and Palestine since the 7th of October? For example, have you added other dialogue partners?

Our policy for our tours to Israel and Palestine has always been to spend an equal amount of time on both sides. We still do. But what is even more important than before since 7th October are the people who work with us on the other side. They are incredibly courageous people, some of whom are heavily criticised in their own societies for working with the other side. They are a sign of hope for us all. That's why they should have their say.

# Has there been an increase in demand for digital events in Israel and Palestine?

It's a very popular topic. We organise two announced seminars every month. Participants experience these seminars as a kind of safe space where they can ask questions and share their views, for example about media reports in Germany or German policy on Israel. Many experience this as liberating. I did the maths the other day. We must have reached a thousand people with our itineraries to Israel and Palestine since 7th October. That's a very good result. You have always worked closely with local partners, inviting them to talks with the groups. What do you hear from them about the situation in Israel and Palestine?

We hear a lot of despair, fear and also inner conflict on both sides. There's a lot that's been broken. That's why it's more important than ever for us to emphasise joint initiatives and positive examples such as the Israeli-Arab campaign Standing Together. But we also hear how shattered people's belief is that there is nothing that can be done together with the other side. On the Israeli side, there is a certain prevailing opinion that what is now happening in Gaza had to happen somehow. And on the Palestinian side, there is little empathy for the Israeli side.



You don't necessarily have to get on a plane to go on a political study trip with Alsharq. A good internet connection is all you need to obtain authentic information from people in the region.

The general feeling is that each side has inflicted great trauma on the other.

# Is that why your dialogue partners dropped out?

No one has dropped out because of this, but we are still finding that it is a major trial by fire. When one partner made inhumane comments to me about the other side, I couldn't speak to him for a few weeks. We first had to let it all blow over before we could discuss things again in a critical and constructive way.

### Would you say that it has become more complicated to talk about the Middle East since 7th October?

Not necessarily. The things that are happening now are unbelievably horrific. But the situation hasn't really become any more complex. It has been that way for a long time. On the Israeli side, we are partly confronted with an extreme rightwing government; on the Palestinian side, we have Hamas, which doesn't want any peace at all. And then there is an autonomous authority that is completely dysfunctional. The conditions for positive change are very poor. On the other hand, now there is also pressure that can bring a new impetus to this conflict and in the long term this may result in a positive direction for everyone involved.

Your profile as a tour operator primarily appeals to people interested in politics. The attack by Hamas on 7th October and Israel's subsequent war against Hamas in Gaza have seriously deepened the rifts between Israel and Palestine. How do you still man-



You can also learn about a country and its people in a virtual Zoom meeting.

# age to create understanding for the people on both sides?

The only way is to listen. We try to gain access through personal stories. This makes it possible to realise the suffering of others. We show that there are different narratives, different ways of looking at the conflict and different arguments. But it's crucial for us to first understand that there is no right or wrong. We have to accept that these ambivalences exist. In my opinion, the multi-narrative approach is the only way to be able to formulate our own position on the topic of Israel/Palestine in the first place.

*Katja Dorothea Buck conducted the interview.* 





Lots of cables and technical equipment are involved when Christoph Dinkelaker from Alsharq goes on a digital tour.

### Alsharq

Alsharq not only regards itself as a tour operator but above all as a bridge builder and cultural mediator. Besides the tourist aspects, encounters with local people take centre stage.

Alsharq, based in Berlin, has excellent networks with NGOs in each country, so that political challenges can also be addressed during a trip. Alsharq currently offers tours to Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran, Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Morocco, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Tunisia, Turkey and Uzbekistan. There are also numerous digital events and online language courses in Persian and Arabic from beginner to advanced level.

https://www.alsharq-reise.de/en

# A dozen monuments a day

How the Lebanese discover their homeland as a holiday destination

Lebanon offers everything in a very small area to attract tourists in droves: the Mediterranean, snow-capped mountains, vineyards and cedar forests, superbly preserved archaeological sites documenting 10,000 years of human history and a modern cultural landscape rich in diversity. However, the country has been in the grips of crisis for many years.

ebanon lived well off travellers and admirers from all over the world for so many years. But for the past five years or more, the country has been severely hit by one disaster after the other – a financial and economic crisis, COV-ID-19, the explosion in the port of Beirut, political standstill and now the war in the neighbouring country.

You would think that this spells disaster for tourism. But after so many problems, the Lebanese have long since become hardened and have learnt to make the best of each situation and never give up on organising their own lives – as best they can. And that's the reason behind the movement to take more holidays in their own country.

The Lebanon Mountain Trail, a longdistance hiking trail, is very popular. "It extends from Andaket in the north of Lebanon to Marjayoun in the south along a 470 km (290 mi) path that transects more than 76 towns and villages at altitudes ranging from 570 to 2,073 meters (1,870 to 6,800 feet) above sea level," so it says in Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia. Here, noise-stressed Beirut residents experience silence, nature that is still almost unspoilt in many places and also discover the history of the region. You can easily visit up to a dozen historical monuments on a single day trip.

There is accommodation of all categories along the route. A fine example is a former caravanserai in Mtein, a village with many historically interesting buildings and a good winery. The rooms are furnished true to style, equipped with modern bathroom facilities and is priced at \$40 and upwards for an overnight stay.

Of course, all the other tourist attractions are also open, whether it is Byblos or Baalbek, Batroun or Wadi Quadisha, Sidon or the Eshmun Temple, a Phoenician sanctuary from the sixth century BC – all are popular destinations for locals as well as Lebanese exiles who are visiting their homeland on holiday. They flock to the country in large numbers to visit their families, especially at the time of official festivals. Visitors to the region from other countries are also increasing in numbers again with guests even travelling from the Far East and Far West.

The small German community in Beirut is also joining the general movement and organising at least one outing a month to a beautiful city or area of the country – for their own relaxation and enjoyment of life. In this modest way, they are supporting the tourist industry.

Is this an invitation to your next holiday in Lebanon? Yes, I would like that. But the German Foreign Office has issued



There is accommodation of all categories along the Lebanon Mountain Trail – like this former caravanserai in Mtein.



The rooms are stylishly furnished and equipped with modern bathroom facilities – and all at a moderate overnight price.

a travel warning for Lebanon. This doesn't mean that traveling to the country is forbidden, but you do so at your own risk. And to tell you the truth, we sometimes feel that we're sitting on a bit of a powder keg here. No, the country is not free from tensions and caution is definitely advised, especially in the south.

But anyone who decides to come anyway will always be warmly welcomed and accompanied.

Renate Ellmenreich is pastor in the Protestant German-speaking congregation in Beirut. She writes about some of the congregation's outings in her blog dialoginbeirut.wordpress.com (only in German).

# **Romania instead of Beirut**

Why the SiMO study programme had to leave Lebanon

It was supposed to be an interesting year of study at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut. But then the 7th of October occurred, followed by the war in Gaza. Now students on the "Studies in the Middle East" (SiMO) programme are no longer studying ecumenism and Orthodox theology in Lebanon, but in Sibiu, Romania.

n 7 October 2023, we in Lebanon were totally unaware at first of the events taking place in our neighbouring country. We were hiking in the Lebanese mountains and had almost no internet reception, so we were relatively cut off from the outside world. I did receive a message from my parents in Germany asking if I had heard about what had happened, but I didn't really know what they meant.

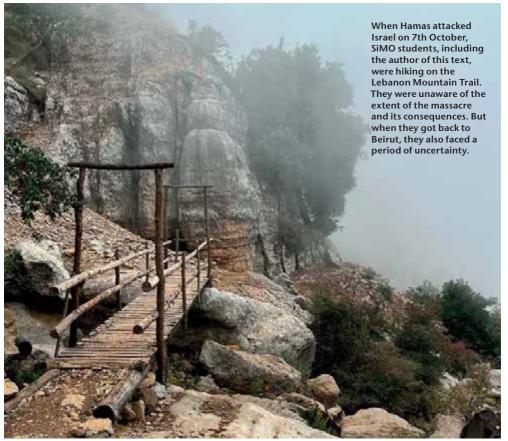
It was only after we got back to Beirut that we read about the events in the news and gradually realised the full extent of what had happened. In the days that followed, everything felt more or less normal and we were able to continue our theological studies at the Near East of Theology (NEST). Nothing had changed for us. We continued to attend our classes, met up with other students on coffee breaks or went on small outings in Beirut. As time went by, however, we realised how massive the conflict had become and we began wondering whether Lebanon might also become more affected.

At that time, I was still feeling very safe in Beirut in general, especially at our university. That's why I decided to stay in Lebanon for the time being until I received an advisory from the German Foreign Office that I should leave the country. After all, life in Lebanon seemed to continue relatively normally on the whole. The people around me had a mostly calming effect on me, even if there was a gradually noticeable increase in tension.

Finally, the German Foreign Office issued an explicit instruction to leave the country and it became clear that we would have to go. Suddenly everything happened so quickly. Just one day later, I was on my way back to Germany. In all this chaos, we had very little time to say our goodbyes to our fellow students and our lecturers at the NEST. We had only just got to really know and appreciate them. We barely had time to leave the city in which we had just settled in.

It was especially hard to realise that most of the other students and teachers at the NEST would be staying in Beirut while we have to return to Germany. In the days and weeks that followed, we had a challenging time adjusting to life back in Germany and dealing with the new situation. This was not easy as our thoughts were frequently with those in the Middle East and we had to come to grips with our situation in many ways.

At first, it was uncertain exactly what would happen to us. Some of us were able to continue their studies in Germany; for others the winter semester had already started long ago, so continuing was more complicated. There were also other problems, such as finding new accommodation.



The following months were a mixed bag of thoughts, for example not wanting to give up the idea of eventually returning to Lebanon, but also slowly widening our scope of possible alternatives. Finally, it became clear to us that there was no chance any more in the foreseeable future of completing our year abroad in Beirut.

After we had finally got over our initial disappointment, we took up the offer from our scholarship organisation – the Lutheran World Federation – to continue our studies abroad in Romania (Sibiu) as part of the "Ecumenical Semester". There we now have the opportunity to continue our studies in ecumenism and Orthodox theology in particular, for which I am very grateful.

Jan Jakob Bergmann

# When students praise their school

Plenty of good news from the Johann Ludwig Schneller School

The disastrous economic situation in Lebanon has meant that the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) has admitted many more children and young people to the boarding home, day school and vocational training programme this academic year – with very positive results.

t present, a total of 331 boys and girls attend the JLSS. This is 68 more than last year. There are now 171 students at the boarding home, 47 more than before, and the number of apprentices has risen by 30 to a total of 121. The school had to open an additional residential group for boys in order to provide proper accommodation for all the children and young people at the boarding home. The new residential group is now housed in the old farmhouse which was renovated especially for this purpose. An additional group of girls has been moved to the side wing of the guest house.

Owing to the enormous increase in the number of students, the school has taken on additional teachers and educators and fortunately has been able to re-hire some of the staff that the school had to make redundant in 2017 due to the massive salary increases in the public sector.

A group of more than ten young people from Arsal, a remote town in the north of the Bekaa Valley, has turned out to be particularly successful. The fact that they are at the JLSS at all is thanks to Mohammad, a student at the vocational school. He was visiting his cousin in Arsal last summer and got talking to his cousin's friends. The boys were complaining that there were no vocational training opportunities locally. Their school in Arsal was in very poor condition, with no equipment, and the teachers were often absent. The boys were always told not to worry because they would transfer to the next grade at the end of the school year regardless. However, they also realised that a certificate on paper was useless unless it came with proper schooling.

Mohammad told them about the JLSS, that things are strict there and that attendance is compulsory. He talked about his vocational training, the well-equipped workshops, life in the boarding home and his belief that he would have a good future after graduation. Although life in the boarding home is tough, there are good sports facilities and plenty of leisure activities at the JLSS.

Shortly before he left Arsal, his friends asked Mohammad to enquire whether the JLSS could accept them all for the next academic year. Mohammad kept his promise. Since the autumn, the young people from Arsal have been attending vocational training courses at the JLSS. The school managed to dispel their only worry: what would happen if the roads were blocked by a winter snowstorm and they couldn't make it home in the north of the Bekaa Valley at the weekend? They were assured that in this case they would be able to stay at the JLSS and would be provided with everything they needed.

"From day one, we were impressed by how helpful they were to others and how enthusiastic they were with their studies,"



This is where the trainers learn: new knowledge is needed to maintain and repair electric vehicles.

says Reverend George Haddad, Director of the JLSS. "These young people are full of praise for the JLSS. They talk about the huge difference compared to the schools in their region. It's wonderful to see how young people who otherwise have few opportunities in life become serious adults who are aware of the need for a good education, especially in a country like Lebanon," says Haddad. It is even better to see the positive influence this group of young men has had on other students in the workshops and residential groups.

In the meantime, word has also got around to some girls in Arsal about how well they are prepared for life at the JLSS. Some have already asked if they can attend in the next academic year. Provided the school has room, it will do its best to admit them.

There is also more good news to report from the JLSS. The special support programme for students with learning difficulties has been continued. Additional teachers have been hired to give them extra tuition, especially in the evenings, to help them catch up with their classmates. "Thanks to this additional oneon-one support, weak boarding students have done very well," says George Haddad, who also reports that the photovoltaic system has proven to be an enormous blessing on many occasions. During the day, the classrooms are heated by solar power when necessary. This saves the school enormous costs for diesel fuel.

The economic situation in Lebanon remains problematic. The fall in the value of the Lebanese currency is having a positive effect on local companies which can export cheaply. But this in turn leads to higher salaries for employees in industry. However, it also has a negative impact on the public sector where salaries cannot be increased. There is the risk that teachers and trainers could be easily enticed away by industry. In order not to lose its staff, the JLSS has had to pay them higher salaries. This was one of the reasons why the school fees for day students were increased quite considerably. Boarding students, on the other hand, still do not have to pay school fees as their parents are among the poorest of the poor.

Katja Dorothea Buck

### Swiss Schneller Association elects new Executive Committee

Aarau (SVS). At the General Meeting of the Swiss Association for the Schneller Schools (SVS) on 20th March in Aarau, one of the items on the agenda was the election of the Executive Committee for



# Schweizer Verein für die Schneller-Schulen SVS

the next three years. Three resignations needed to be replaced. It was difficult to find a replacement for Kathrin Zybach who had held the office of treasurer with great competence for the past twelve years. Her work – for which she never received a penny - was acknowledged by the members of the Association with a standing ovation. Mechthild Babel was elected to succeed her on the Executive Committee.

Thomas Maurer was elected to replace Saskia Urech who left the Executive Committee a year ago. Johanna Leidel, who is currently working as an intern at the TSS in Jordan, was elected to replace Tobias Hönger. The remaining four Executive Committee members, Ronald Herbig Weil, Simon Pfeiffer, Dagmar Bujack (Deputy Chair) and Ursus Waldmeier (Chair) were re-elected unanimously. Maja Petrus, who has been the auditor for many years, was also re-elected.

The 2023 annual financial statement of the SVS, with an income of around CHF 115,000 was approved. The 2024 budget was also approved. The budget provides for a basic funding of CHF 30,000 to the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon and to the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Jordan. In addition, there will be a further CHF 41,000 for special projects at the JLSS and CHF 59,000 at the TSS.

It was also noted with appreciation that all Committee members work for the SVS without any remuneration. This means that a large proportion of donations can be made directly available to the schools.

Ursus Waldmeier

### Letters to the editor

Re.: SM 1/2024 "The Bond of Peace. Palestine, Israel and the hope for reconciliation – despite everything"

What shames me as a Protestant Christian is the obdurate attitude of our senior church leaders towards the Middle East crisis. They fail to recognise that 27 Israeli peace and reconciliation initiatives have called for an immediate ceasefire and peace negotiations after 7 October 2023. This means they have carried over into the sadness of the present time what Jesus called "love your enemy" in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5.

Dr Ulrich Kammer, Laubach

It is very inspiring to see that there are so many of us all over the world who believe in peace and want sustainable peace.

Dr Ziad Fahed, Beirut (Lebanon)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the Schneller Magazine 1/2024. Your interview partners are amazing. Also the article by Katja Dorothea Buck on the WDP. I wish the entire church leadership and the synod members would read this magazine.

Ernst-Ludwig Vatter, Aichwald

The new Schneller magazine arrived just in time for the World Day of Prayer – thank you very much. And since the liturgy of the Palestinian women was/is also very controversial these days, I am really happy to read your articles in this issue. They are so important, especially for building bridges...

Magdalena Zantow, Plüderhausen

Katja Dorothea Buck and Dr Uwe Gräbe deserve our sincere thanks for their unemotional, factual and informative coverage of the trouble caused this year by the liturgy created by Palestinian women for the service at the Women's World Day of Prayer.

#### Dr Jürgen Regul, Ratingen

The WDP 2024 is over but its impact will be felt for a long time to come. The church service was intense and moving. I would especially like to thank Katja Dorothea Buck and Uwe Gräbe for their articles in the Schneller magazine. The clear



and knowledgeable presentation of the issues – also in recalling the WDP 1994 – was refreshing and should have been much more widely publicised. Mrs Buck also deserves the Grand Order of the WDP (which unfortunately does not yet exist) for her tireless work in the various preparations running up to the event. Many of the women responsible summoned the courage to plan the WDP based on qualified information and not to be intimidated. A big THANK YOU and many blessings for the work of the Schneller schools and the Association.

Brigitte Koring, Heilbronn

I have been to Palestine several times over the last few years and am therefore interested in receiving all the information I can about the region. My special thanks for the last issue (1/24)! It shows some very important examples of the encouraging activities undertaken by Israelis and



Palestinians. What I also found interesting were the articles by Mrs Buck and Mr Gräbe on the World Day of Prayer 2024. I also had the impression that the focus of the debate about the liturgy was not so much on the actual experiences and suffering of women in Palestine but instead on the attempts to avoid any suspicion of anti-Semitism.

When the German Coordination Council for the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation cites as evidence of "anti-Semitic, anti-Israel stereotypes" the fact that the liturgy did not explicitly emphasise "that Jesus was Jewish and that Psalm 85 proposed for the service was not explicitly introduced as a prayer from the Jewish tradition" (p. 5 in Schneller Magazine 1/24), this can be seen as a mistake or as thoughtlessness, or it can be assumed that it is common knowledge. However, I cannot recognise any anti-Semitism here. Especially as the text was apparently already known to the Coordination Council. Or did the Coordination Council still need proof against its suspicion that it is really not anti-Semitic?

Thanks to the Schneller schools for their work and I wish them good luck for the future!

#### Rosemarie Wechsler, Munich

Many thanks for the excellent Schneller magazine, especially issue 1/2024 with the excellent articles by Katja Dorothea Buck and others.

Rev. Wolfgang Marquardt, Stuttgart

I would like to express my thanks for the excellent Schneller magazine. I always enjoy reading the articles – even if the context is often depressing. At the same time, the magazine is usually full of glimmers of hope whether big or small – especially when it comes to news from the Schneller schools. I was particularly impressed and moved by the article "Coming together to mourn for all victims" by Katja Dorothea Buck in issue 4/2003. Thank you!

Jutta Wiebke Boysen, Diemelstadt-Wethen

With a blessing on Easter Monday, I would like to thank you once again for an exciting, highly perceptive and extremely pertinent issue of the Schneller magazine. Asking the question "Is there still such a thing as a bond of peace" in the Middle East, you travel to various, now often devastated places in the Holy Land and allow people to have their say who, in the midst of the suffering they are forced to endure, yet continue to search for signs of hope.

Compared to my other sources of information, your analyses are the best I have read, especially because you present them from the perspective of your own personal consternation. I repeatedly bring up your work in the liveliest discussion forum that exists in Goslar - the Emeriti Circle of pastors and church staff, about 25 of them, where I frequently give talks (next week on interreligious education as an educational story).

#### Prof. Dr Johannes Lähnemann, Goslar

Thank you very much for the last issue of the Schneller magazine which I found particularly well-balanced.

Dr Martin Schneller, Austria

### Obituary

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) bids farewell to Christoph Schneller, who passed away on 2 December 2023 at the age of 85. Christoph Schneller was a great-grandson of Johann Ludwig and Magdalena Schneller, who founded the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem in 1860.

Christoph Schneller, son of Ernst and Erika Schneller, was born in Jerusalem in 1938. After finishing his secondary education in Cologne, he worked on building the new Theodor Schneller School in Amman in 1959/60. After graduating in social studies, he went to Thailand for 16 years where he was involved in several projects to empower the country's citizens.

On his return to Germany, he worked as a diaconal employee at the Begegnungsund Beratungszentrums für Flüchtlinge (Refugee Meeting and Counselling Centre) (BBF) in Karlsruhe. Christoph Schneller was co-founder of the "Freundeskreis Asyl" (Friends of Asylum) in Karlsruhe and served on their board of directors for many years. In recognition of his commitment, the city of Karlsruhe honoured him with the Integration Award in 2018.

The EVS will remember him with gratitude.

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The Schneller Magazine is also available in German and can be read online:

https://schneller-schulen.ems-online.org





Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17



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