

# SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



EVS Evangelical Association  
for the Schneller Schools

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## Angels, organs and song

Church music in the Middle East

## CHURCH MUSIC IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Front cover: Students of the JLSS with pastor and songwriter Fabian Vogt, composer of the song for the 50th anniversary of the EMS (Parviz Mir-Ali)

Back cover: Singing accompanied by accordion at the evening service in a Protestant centre for the elderly in Cairo (Katja Buck)

**Dear Reader,**

it has certainly been a challenging year – not only because of the global upheavals caused by war, pandemics and climate change. In the midst of all this, we are grateful that the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) managed to celebrate its 50th anniversary in a befitting manner. The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) is a founding member of the EMS and has been part of this international fellowship for the past fifty years. In view of current challenges, it shows more than ever the power that is in ecumenism.



This was also evident at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Karlsruhe, where so many tricky issues were debated – including post-colonialism, anti-Semitism, Israel and Palestine. We were present as the EMS and the EVS and we hosted some very challenging workshops. We also celebrated with guests from the Middle East, such as the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem and the Director of the Theodor Schneller School in Amman, who stayed on to attend this year's Schneller Festival.

The main feature of this issue is church music in the Middle East. The range of music which our authors and contributors report on extends from the classical organ to traditional Eastern church hymns. The processes of assimilation into a culture and the constant transfer of heritage to what were originally foreign contexts play just as important a role as clinging to traditional ways or making completely new beginnings. Many things have also been set in motion at the Schneller schools, as you will find out in this issue.

One change recently took place at our Secretariat. Felix Weiss, who was responsible for the Schneller Association and the Middle East Liaison Desk for almost four years, is moving to the financial management unit of the EMS. At the same time, Joscha Quade, a graduate of the study programme in Beirut, is now taking over these tasks in the Middle East unit. We sincerely thank Mr Weiss for his active commitment and wish Mr Quade all the best and God's blessing for the start of his career.

The editorial team wishes you all a blessed Christmas and a happy, peaceful New Year.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Uwe Gräbe". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Uwe Gräbe

## You find God wherever things are unpleasant

**I**n our region, Christmas is one of the most important and emotional festivals we celebrate during the course of the year. This is certainly due to the fact that we celebrate it at the darkest time of the year. It feels really cosy and homely when you can spend time at the Christmas market or at home in candlelight and with a warming glass of punch. For many, this unique feeling is what makes the festive season so special. This has gone so far as to transform the biblical message at Christmas into an emotional story about shepherds sitting cosily around the camp fire, warming themselves; about exhausted but happy parents who have found refuge in a rustic stable (how romantic!), naturally accompanied by an ox and a donkey (how sweet!); in the manger lies a beauti-

ful baby boy with curly hair; and up above, this idyllic scene is watched over by the heavenly host, little angels in shining white robes, happily rejoicing, and perhaps some of them even playing an instrument for accompaniment. “Rejoice, rejoice, arise and praise the days!” So many of us have been quite familiar with this festival since our childhood days.

It was only when I went to Jerusalem to study that I learned that Christmas is celebrated in a completely different way in other parts of the world. I also found this later when I was a pastor in Russia and the Caucasus. In all these places, we as Protestant congregations also celebrated Christmas, but as a small minority. For Jews and Muslims, this festival is not included in



Nativity plays are performed all over the world at Christmas in many Protestant congregations. The players here are children and young adults from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Reconciliation in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where the “Evangelical” Christmas is not a holiday.

their religious calendar. Most of the other Christians in these countries celebrate on a completely different date in their calendar, almost two weeks later.

We Protestants always celebrated “our” feast on a normal working day, with everything that goes with it: the accompanying hectic and bustle of a working day, the traffic jams as well as children and young people who have to go to school on that day. For us, Christmas was not a festival that is in the general calendar. It comes “automatically”, whether we want it or not. It was a celebration that we prepared for and celebrated consciously. As a result, I was able to rediscover the message of Christmas for myself and I gained much more depth and meaning from it. It was precisely because it was not “self-evident” that I began to look at many things in a new way.

I can well imagine it is very similar at the Schneller schools in Lebanon and Jordan. The story of the young couple who has to leave their home town and who find no other shelter than a miserable stable is not a sob story but something the students know from their own experience. The fact that people are poor and have to warm themselves by an open fire at night in order not to freeze to death is not camp fire romance, but bitter reality. And that the young family has to flee from violence and terror shortly after the birth in order to save the life of their child is something that some have even experienced themselves.

The message of Christmas is therefore all the more astonishing and not taken for granted at all. God does not shy away from

what people have to suffer and endure. Quite the contrary. God himself goes right into the middle of things, into the very heart of poverty and violence, into the midst of darkness and hopelessness. You find God wherever it is literally unpleasant and difficult to endure. That’s exactly where God is. It is probably easier to see how upsetting this message of Christmas is in a setting that is not filled with Christmas romance. Just how little Christmas is taken for granted can be seen when the festival is not bathed in the glow of lights and the aroma of mulled wine.

Christmas can be an occasion for us to reflect about the Schneller schools in the Middle East, about their mission and our duty to support them. The fact that they are places where young people experience something of God’s amazing closeness and love, regardless of their religious background and social status. A place where the message of the angels, “and on earth peace among those whom he favours!” does not sound like it is taken for granted at all. In reality, it is needed even more urgently and expected all the more eagerly.

*Rev. Markus Schoch has been Bishop at the Prelature of Reutlingen of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg since May 2022. He has been on the Executive Committee of the Schneller Foundation – Education for Peace since summer 2022.*



## The sounds of the muezzin mixed with Bach

An interview exploring the subject:  
What does Jerusalem sound like exactly?

**Klaus Schulten was district church choirmaster in Württemberg for many years and later organist at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem. He is author of several books on German organ music in Palestine and the music tradition at the Syrian Orphanage.**


*Mr Schulten, how does it feel to be an organist in Jerusalem?*

It's a strange feeling when you are sitting at the organ in the middle of the Arabic part of the Old City of Jerusalem and then hear the muezzin from the Omar Mosque right next door. Or when the beautiful distinctive bells of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre only a few metres away suddenly start to ring and drown out everything else. All the while I may be playing a piece by J. S. Bach.

In any case, Jerusalem gives you a different perspective on things – on Europe, on the evolution of churches and their culture and the coexistence of different forms of spirituality.

*Does an organ even fit in Jerusalem, in the Middle East?*

The Church of the Redeemer is a German church which, like other churches, maintains and contributes its culture. The church was consecrated in 1898 and since then organs have been as much a part of it as the altar, the pulpit or the baptismal font. Incidentally, the organ was "invented" in the Orient. Around the end of the 9th century, organs were occasionally brought to Europe as a particularly luxuri-



**Klaus Schulten in front of the organ at the Auguste Viktoria Foundation on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.**

ous gift that was supposed to demonstrate the splendour and artistic craftsmanship of the Orient. Over the centuries, the organ gradually became an established feature in churches and changed the culture of Europe.

*As a church musician, how would you describe the sound of Jerusalem?*

Well, on the one hand, there are many bells, whether they are the distinctive, loud and melodious bells of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, or the more familiar peal of the bells of the Church of the Redeemer. Then there are the calls to prayer of the muezzins broadcast over loudspeakers and dominate the sound of the Old City at certain hours of the day. Then if you walk through the souqs (street mar-



kets), you will hear the latest Arabic pop songs blaring from many shops. And there are the shouts of the street vendors touting their wares. Finally, there are the many voices of tourists in different languages. But as evening draws on, the sounds give way to the high-pitched voices of children playing and the deeper ones of adults talking. Finally, around midnight, you hear the rubbish trucks driving through the narrow streets. And even later – if you are walking alone – you are left with the sound of your own footsteps and now and then the meowing of a few lonely cats.

*Would you call all that music?!*

In itself, music presupposes “order”, that is, an active use of tones or notes in a deliberate “composition”. That’s the

meaning of the word composition. Of course, noises are far from being music, although they are still “sounds”. But they can become a kind of music – fascinating soundscapes that occur quite randomly. And anyway, what sounds like music to one person is an annoyance to another. They only hear the din of the street, they perceive the call to prayer from the mosques as droning or the ringing of bells as cacophony.

*How do you as a musician feel about the Islamic call to prayer?*

The muezzin calls to prayer – for me it was the highest level of perfection. At dawn, for example, the chants seem rather simple and melancholic, but in the evening, they seem more refined and masterful. They often resound simultaneously from different parts of the city, loudly, overlapping, sometimes far away, sometimes close at hand. I found it really beautiful, exotic and fascinating. Sometimes you can hear the common roots in the scales they have with the emergence of European church music, later called “Gregorian chant”, in the early 1st millennium.

*There are common roots between Islamic call to prayer and European church music? You’ll have to explain that. The quarter tones in the Arabic music system are notorious – to Western ears they sound “off-key” or even “false”.*

That’s right. In Western music, quarter tones have remained a rare phenomenon, whereas they are a marked feature of the Arabic tonal system. For us, an octave consists of twelve semitones. In the course of time, two “keys” have developed in Europe: major and minor. But the oldest melodies of our hymns are not in major or minor keys at all, but in the so-called church or ecclesiastical modes. The hymn



Churches, domes and chapels – but not only the sight of Jerusalem is unique. The Holy City also has its very own sound. The tower of the Church of the Redeemer can be seen on the left of the Dome of the Rock.

“Christ is risen”, for example, is set in Dorian or in the 1st mode, as it were. Each semitone is in a different place in the eight European church modes than they are in major and minor – this gives these melodies their own particular tonality. This is also the case in the Arabic tonal system. Most of the structure is reminiscent of the core of our church tones, and then quarter tones are added.

*That’s rather confusing now...*

Yes, but only to our ears. The Arabic musical system is much more complex in the formation of its scales than the European system. Besides the semitones, there are quarter tones – an octave not only has 12 semitones, it also has up to 24 steps. Certain groups of four tones (maqam) form

the basis for a scale. These are reminiscent of a D minor scale, such as the Nihawand mode. Others, however, are completely foreign to us in their sequence of whole, half and quarter tones.

*What impressed you most about the “music” in the Old City?*

Good question. Let me think about that for a moment – for me, apart from the chants of the muezzins, it is the bells of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the hourly prayers of the monks in the Catholic Dormitio Abbey on Mount Zion.

*Katja Dorothea Buck  
conducted the interview.*



# An Organ for Amman

The dream of the founding fathers at last came true

Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart



Organ lessons at the Syrian orphanage around 1930: Hermann Schneller introduces two boys to the art of playing the organ.

After the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon received a small organ five years ago, an organ might soon also echo in the Christ Church of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman, so continuing a Schneller tradition. Indeed, the Syrian Orphanage was an outstanding institution at the time, not only in terms of education but also in terms of church music.

**K**laus Schulten is considered a profound expert on the organ tradition in the Middle East covering Cairo, Jerusalem and Beirut. During his time as organist at the Church of the Redeem-


er in Jerusalem, he discovered the tradition at the Syrian Orphanage. Up until 1940, there used to be a large organ there. After the American organ of the YMCA building in Jerusalem, it was the second largest organ in the Middle East and was much more than a prestige object. "The pioneering educational work of the Syrian Orphanage was deeply rooted in the worship services, which included organ and choral music as well as a beautiful liturgy," says Schulten, who has spent years researching records of the period. "The Syrian Orphanage maintained a unique song tradition in German and Arabic, performing memorable concerts." >

In 1898, the Syrian Orphanage received its first organ, an instrument made by Weigle from Echterdingen near Stuttgart. However, in the great fire on 12 June 1910, it was completely destroyed along with the entire church of the institution. "Originally, due to lack of funds, the plans were to rebuild the church without bells, without painted windows, without altarpieces and without an organ," says Schulten. But only a few weeks after the fire, the director at the time, Theodor Schneller, requested the addition of a proper organ loft in the rear part of the church after all.

The second organ, again built by Weigle, had 16 stops. At the end of 1931, it was upgraded to 27 stops. In the meantime, Hermann Schneller had become director of the Syrian Orphanage. In 1938, despite a very strained economic situation, six more stops were added to the organ.

But the new organ did even complete two years in service. In May 1940, the last service in the Syrian Orphanage heralded the end of its musical tradition. After the founding of the Israeli state in 1948, the organ - like the windows, the bells and the pews - was dismantled and moved by United Nations trucks from West to East Jerusalem to the Auguste Victoria Foundation.

"It is doubtful, however, whether it even arrived there in one piece," says Schulten. "Such an organ consists of more than 1,500 pipes, with several of the pneumatic pipes measuring many metres long, various parts of the enclosure, manual and



The small organ with its eight stops once stood in Elgin, Scotland. For the past five years, it has accompanied the services in St Michael's Church at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School.

pedal soundboards, several valves and bellows, the motor, the console with stop knobs and keyboards, etc. All this is actually impossible to dismantle and store professionally without qualified organ builders," says the organ expert.

Later, the organ was brought to Amman. "More parts were probably lost along the way," says Schulten. Hermann Sch-



EMS/Haddad

were never enough funds to buy them. That was until five years ago, when the organ at St Sylvester's Church in Elgin, Scotland, became "free". It was to be given away free of charge for the purchaser if he collected it himself. Klaus Schulten heard about it and quickly realised that its size and sound design would fit very well into St Michael's Church at the JLSS. He coordinated the operation together with the organ builder Gerhard Walcker, who dismantled the organ in Scotland and rebuilt in Lebanon.

All that is left now is the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. Schulten is sure that a suitable second-hand instrument can also be found for the TSS. "Good organs that are thrown away here can be relocated somewhere else," he says. He says it is necessary to see which instrument is suitable for the gallery of the TSS in terms of size and weight.

But even though second-hand organs are now available "for free", transport, assembly and dismantling come with a five-figure price tag. This can only be financed by donations. It can certainly be said that in times of crisis, there are more important things than an organ. Quite apart from the added value in terms of church music which would radiate far beyond Amman, the TSS, like the JLSS five years ago, could continue a tradition that has already made the Schneller work in Jerusalem so special.

neller personally went to Amman in the 1950s to see what was still there, he says. "He wanted to have a small organ built for his new school in Lebanon from the existing stops and organ parts. But in the end, what was left was too little." The organ had to be regarded as lost.

At both the JLSS and the TSS, the plans for the churches included organs but there

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## „Together we are free“

The Schneller School in Lebanon and their version of the EMS song

The new school year started at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon with a special project. For one week, Fabian Vogt and Parviz Mir-Ali came to Khirbet Kanafar to work with the students on their own version of the EMS Jubilee Song.

When the power goes out in the region, Joe spreads his arms and shouts with an ironic smile, “Welcome to Lebanon” - and this happens several times every day. Public electricity is a very rare commodity in Lebanon. Power cuts are therefore part of everyday life there. The lucky ones are those who have a generator to produce their own power and have the money to pay for the expensive fuel which is also scarce. Or those who are in the fortunate position of having a photovoltaic system to generate solar power, like the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS), although it is only during the day when the sun is shining. In the evenings and at night, the generator kicks in if there is a power failure - but only after a short while. Someone could write a whole book about power generation in Lebanon.

Anyway, Joe is a music teacher at the JLSS in Khirbet Kanafar and always gives lessons on Mondays and Tuesdays. On the other days, he takes care of his company which supplies fish from Beirut to the Lebanese hinterland. But most of all, the musical fishmonger and graduate percussionist is a gifted teacher. One sharp look from Joe’s mischievous eyes and twenty frolicking children are suddenly highly concentrated and attentive. How does



Parviz Mir-Ali

he do it? He doesn’t even know himself! But his friendly authority is even a topic of conversation in the staff room.

Joe will help us. Of course, he will. We only have a few days to record a Lebanese version of the EMS song “Together we are free” with as many young people as possible - modern church music in the Middle Eastern, pop and country style. On top of all that, most of the children in the upper grades understand English, but the younger ones need a translation. Joe is





The children are highly concentrated as they learn which movements they should make to the melody and when.

happy to do this. And so, he tells the students about the 50th anniversary of the EMS, about how they support the school ... and that the grades have the chance, like many other institutions all over the world, to sing the Jubilee hit. "Are you with us?" Of course, you are! Lebanese children and young adults now have something to cheer about.

And then it all starts. First, they hum the melody, then they speak the lyrics together, sing the chorus, and finally they

all clap - and to top it all off, there is a little dance routine that helps the younger ones to understand the words: "Together we can show the world, what heaven will be."

Then they all start talking with each other because there are many Muslim children at the Christian Schneller School. And it is also important for the Director George Hadadd that the religions learn to coexist and live side by side. That they discover for themselves how powerful the role of faith is in peacemaking and that



**"And now all of you!" Fabian Vogt conducting during a rehearsal in the school yard. Next to him is Joe, the music teacher.**

they treat each other with respect. That fits in perfectly with the EMS song which says, "If we love each other, respect our dignity."

In the meantime, Joe has prepared his Arabic drums: a darbuka and a riq. He records a percussion soundtrack that will give the Lebanese version of the song a very distinctive sound. Around him are dozens of children and young adults who find it hard to understand they have to be very quiet during a sound recording. After all, everything is so exciting. "Joe, can you just come and have a look! With your knowing eyes."

Then it's the turn of the soloists, most of whom are standing in front of a microphone for the very first time. It doesn't sound quite perfect yet. It doesn't have to. They're all having tons of fun. And Joe sings a few lines too - although he thinks his English has a Lebanese accent. So what? Our English probably has a German accent! But everyone understands each other. Especially because we are making music together.

Then, on the last day, it's showdown. All the different grades who we rehearsed the song with come together for the big recording. And it has to work with just one good microphone. That's all we could bring with us to Lebanon in view of the 20 kg baggage restriction per person. While we record several "takes", the children all shout like excited chickens: "Are we going to be YouTube stars? Are we going to be famous?" Well, just wait and see! Whatever happens, you'll get the link and you



The children listen attentively to the explanations of how the EMS Jubilee Song will be recorded in a moment.

can watch it together on the internet. If there's no power cut. "Welcome to Lebanon!" And Joe grins again.

After we've finished, we go to a small shop opposite the school. The owner already knows us and asks with curiosity: "So? Did you finish your hit with the Schneller youngsters?" Parviz, our producer, nods: "Basically yes, but the whole thing still has to be edited, of course. It'll take a bit of time. We also want to include a few evocative photos of the school. Because the nice thing is that almost a whole school was involved in a music project here." Then he asks: "Do you believe the Schneller School is an asset to the region?" The owner shakes her head: "For the region? Oh no, for the whole of Lebanon. This school is one of the best things we have in our country." Wow!

*Fabian Vogt*

## About ...

Rev. Dr Fabian Vogt composed the Jubilee Song "Together we are free" especially for the 50th anniversary of the EMS. At the beginning of 2022, it was sent out to the worldwide EMS network as a join-in project. The amazing result was 20 different video versions of the song. During a music project week, the musician worked together with the students at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School and with the support of music producer Parviz Mir-Ali to produce the 21st version. As soon as it is edited, it will be available at <https://ems-online.org/unterstuetzen/libanon-jlss>.

All versions of the EMS song are collected at [www.ems-online.org/gottesdienst](http://www.ems-online.org/gottesdienst). There you can also listen to the EMS song that children and young adults from the Theodor Schneller School in Amman recorded with the Jordanian singer Qamar Badwan. A visit to the EMS website is therefore well worth your while.



## Songs of praise with keyboard and lute

Singing in the Stuttgart Arab Evangelical Congregation

**What songbook do we use at an Arab Evangelical congregation? None at all. Do we sing anyway? Of course, we do. Every service must include plenty of time for singing. What songs do we sing? That's a really exiting question.**

The evolution of Protestant Arabic hymns is closely linked to the growth of Protestant churches in the Middle East. When the Protestant mission in the Middle East began in the mid-19th century, these churches brought their own hymns with them, which were then translated into Arabic. They were mainly songs of the American revival movement and were printed in songbooks in choruses for four voices - as was customary in the "home country". When colonialism and dependence on the West came to an end, the new churches also emancipated themselves, and the calls for their own texts and melodies became louder.

In the early 1970s, the "Better Life" choir was founded in Cairo. The singers started with existing songs, but soon wrote new songs that quickly became popular - they had hit the spirit of the time. This was followed by many other choirs and singers, most of whom were themselves songwriters, composers and singers and this resulted in new songs of praise in the congregations. Keyboard, oud, accordion, guitar and drums replaced the harmonium and piano - sometimes under fierce protest from older members of the congregation. That's why in Lebanon and Jordan these new songs were initially recorded only in recording studios, not in

churches. The songs made their way into people's homes on cassettes.

At the end of the 1970s, a movement with children's songs also began, because the Western children's songs translated into Arabic found no resonance at all when people worked with children. In fact, classical Arabic is virtually a foreign language for Egyptian children. Co-workers in children's work therefore wrote new songs in the spoken Egyptian dialect and they were welcomed enthusiastically, both in lessons with children and on cassette. Many Arab Christians grew up with these songs and many of them say it was the songs that shaped their faith.

In parallel to the worship songs in the style of the charismatic Hillsong movement, musicians who came from classical Arabic music wrote songs in the Oriental

Songs of praise  
in Arabic with  
German subtitles:  
the Egyptian singer  
Dora Sherif is one of  
the musical stars in  
the Evangelical Arab  
community.





style. They ranged from ornate forms to simple Oriental melodies that are popular among the rural population.

Most Protestant churches in Egypt have services on both non-working Fridays and Sundays. The Sunday morning service caters to the older members of the congregation; the second service on Sunday evening is geared towards the younger members of the congregation who come after work and look forward to many hours of singing songs of praise. Members of the Orthodox churches have also found interest in the modern songs which are true to life. So, today, there are very many who attend both the Orthodox church of origin (and remain members there ) and Protestant services at the same time.

A social and spiritual network often formed around the choirs, ranging from a children's choir or some sort of living community through to ministry work. The fame of the singers also extends far beyond just conducting the singing in the congregation. They are given a fixed time

at the beginning and end of the service with prayer; worship services with songs and spiritual impulses from the singer are popular. Several have gone on to obtain further qualifications and are now pastors.

So many new songs have been written in the past few decades that it is actually impossible to print songbooks. A Korean group in Cairo collected songs and printed them with chord names for the guitar. But the books were already out of date by the time they were published. So, most people use PowerPoint presentations, which is the quickest way to pick up new songs. However, the same applies here as for the worship songs in our country. One of Egypt's leading preachers recently rebuked the lack of spiritual depth; he warned that more attention should be paid to quality rather than quantity.

The new songs are absolutely indispensable for us in the Arab Evangelical Congregation in Stuttgart. The familiar music with oriental instruments creates a feeling of home. One of our main tasks is to translate more and more Arabic songs into German and provide the transcription of the Arabic for the second generation. Our concerts "Ex oriente vox", which are an intercultural project with Arabic songs (plus translation) and a German supporting programme, create bridges to our Christian Arab brothers and sisters to praise God in different tongues but with one voice.

*Heidi Josua, Arab Evangelical Congregation  
in Stuttgart*



Screenshot: Heidi Josua

## The language of angels

The unique heritage of melodies in Coptic hymns

**In the Coptic Church, the liturgy is held in Coptic, i.e. ancient Egyptian. The hymns also contain melodies that were sung for the Pharaohs. This may sound strange to untrained ears. But if you grow up with it, it can overwhelm your heart when you sing the hymns, even in the 21st century. Bishop Damian, the Coptic bishop in Germany, explains why.**

*Bishop Damian, for people who grew up with Bach, Schütz and Paul Gerhardt, Coptic hymns can sound a little strange at first. Could you give any pointers to help me appreciate them more?*

I'll try. The melodies of Coptic hymns date back to the time of the Pharaohs. When the Coptic Church was founded by the Apostle Mark in the first century, people took the hymns they knew with them into their new faith. For example, we have a hymn on Good Friday praising Christ the Lord. This melody was sung in ancient Egypt whenever the Pharaoh was carried on his shoulders through the crowd.

*That means the melodies you sing today are 4,000 or 5,000 years old... How were they handed down?*

They were always passed on orally. There is no written music for the hymns in the Coptic Church.

*So you can only learn the melodies by singing them?*

Yes, the children listen to the hymns from an early age. We pick it up with our mother's milk, so to speak; we learn the melodies at Sunday school and in church services. Every larger congregation has a

cantor, what we call a mo'allim. He helps the congregation to stay in tune and to keep the rhythm. During the service, the priests pray in alternation with the church people. It is important to have somebody to keep the connection between the two. That's what the cantor does.

*How many hymns are there in the Coptic Church?*

Our heritage of melodies is almost infinite. There are seven different melodies for some texts, depending on when the text occurs in the liturgy during the church year or the time of the day we sing it.

*Nobody can know all that by heart! How has the Coptic Church managed to preserve this heritage over two thousand years?*

Throughout history, it was mainly blind people who played a major role in passing on the melodies. Many of them have an extremely well-developed sense of hearing and an excellent memory. Our music institutes today, where cantors are trained, therefore bear the name of Saint Didymos, a pioneer of the Alexandrian school who taught in the fourth century and was himself blind as a child. Whoever wants to become a cantor has to study for five years. Even today, many of them are blind.

*What is striking about Coptic hymns is that they are often simple melodies that revolve around a fundamental tone. Very rarely are there large intervals. This makes it difficult for the untrained ear to pick out the special features of this music.*

Not only are hymns a form of art, they are above all a prayer through which we



The Coptic tradition that blind people with their good hearing and memory are the mainstays of the oral tradition of Coptic hymns goes back to Saint Didymos who was blind.

come before God. Imagine an infant who has just been nursed by its mother and is lying contentedly in her lap, looking at her. The baby makes sounds and smiles at her. It's exactly the same for us when we sing the hymns. Then we feel we are in the lap of God who loves us. We look up at him smiling and sing. You could also say that the hymns are the language of the angels.

When we sing them, we feel as if we are in heaven.

*But now there are also modern Arabic hymns that are very popular in Egypt and elsewhere. What do you think of them?*

Modern songs are good for other occasions than church services. For example, at youth meetings, congresses or in Sunday school. They are "lighter fare" for in-between. But I myself realise again and again that the heritage of old melodies is so immense that I will probably only learn a small part of them in my whole life.

*What do the young people say?*

They like singing both. Recently, I was at a youth meeting in France. There were hundreds of young people between the ages of 18 and 35. All of them were born in Europe. We sang hymns together. And it was as beautiful, vibrant, alive and harmonious as in my home monastery in Egypt. Our spiritual and cultural heritage goes so deep under the skin, into our hearts and even into our bones. When we sing the psalm texts and prayers, we purify our thoughts, our eyes and our tongues. When we sing the hymns, we connect with the divine. And that feels so good.

*Katja Dorothea Buck conducted the interview.*

# How the queen of instruments is conquering the Middle East

Everything at the SOL Festival in Lebanon revolves around organ music

**The Organ Week in Lebanon will take place for the eighth time on 19 to 26 March 2023 and is aimed at bringing this magnificent instrument closer to all the people in the country. Interest in organ music is growing steadily, despite or perhaps because of the severe economic crisis in the country.**

The organ is considered quite rightly to be the „queen of instruments“. In Lebanon, it was only introduced towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century in the churches of western Christian missions (Jesuits, brothers of Christian schools, Capuchins, Marists, Carmelites, etc.). During the Lebanese war (1975-1990), most organs were destroyed or rendered unplayable. Moreover, many organists who wanted to continue to pursue their passion and make a living from it were forced to emigrate. The great Lebanese composer, organist and pianist Naji Hakim, for example, now lives in France.

When normality gradually returned at the end of the war in 1990, larger churches were built. Congregation work expanded. Over the next twenty years, religious music also took on a new significance. This was fostered by very good choirs at Lebanese universities.

For example, in 1993, I started a choir at Notre Dame University (NDU) with more than 50 singers, as well as a music school and a children's choir for children aged 7 to 14. The NDU music school also estab-

lished an organ school with high standards. At the same time, an ambitious project was taking shape in my mind and heart: to restore the organs that existed before the war - and, why not, to build new organs in other regions of Lebanon.

With the help of several western embassies (Italy, France, Germany, USA, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Mexico), this dream began to take shape as from the summer of 2014. At Christmas 2014, a new organ, bought three years earlier in Rome, was inaugurated in the monastery of Notre Dame de Louaize in Zouk Mosbeh. It had also been expanded by twelve stops. This organ was joined by four other new organs. In addition, the pipes, bellows and keyboards were restored on nine organs in Beirut, as well as other Lebanese cities (Tripoli, Harissa, Antélias, etc.).

The Lebanese Organ Week (SOL Festival) took place for the first time in February 2016. The idea originated at a meeting with Brother Riccardo Ceriani, musical director of the Terra Sancta Organ Festival which has been an annual event in the Holy Land since 2009 and was organised in cooperation with the Italian Cultural Institute in Lebanon. For the first time in the Middle East, students of the organ class of the NDU School of Music also demonstrated their skills. Since then, the organ festival has become a fixed event in the country's arts and cultural calendar.

Public interest in the concerts is growing at a remarkable pace despite the eco-





The great organ in the auditorium of the American University of Beirut is one of the instruments that is heard in all its magnificent beauty at the Organ Festival every year.

conomic and financial challenges facing the country. Secular music has experienced an enormous upswing in Lebanon in recent years. But the festival also stimulates the training of young Lebanese organists. They can take part in courses and „master classes“ given by foreign musicians who perform during the festival.

In cooperation with the Italian Cultural Institute, which generously supports this unique project and thus makes it possible in the first place, we are also trying to internationalise the offer for the only organ classes in Lebanon and the Middle East. Since October 2015, Lebanese organists have been able to study with Maestro Cosimo Prontera, professor for organ at the Gesualdo da Venosa Conservatory in Italy.

However, the challenges the festival faces time and again should not be ignored. These are mainly financial because the musicians' fees and the costs of maintaining the organs must first be funded. In addition, it is difficult to find technicians and experts who are familiar with organs.

Be that as it may, the organ festival in Lebanon is dedicated to music aficionados of all ages and backgrounds. It is especially aimed at a young audience. We want to bring this masterly instrument closer to all people in Lebanon.

*Father Khalil Rahmé is director of the music school at Notre Dame University-Louaizé, as well as director of the Festival of Organ Week in Lebanon (SOL).*

## When Armenia's musical soul sings

The choir of the great musician-priest Komitas Vardapet

**KOUSAN** in Lebanon is the only Armenian choir that was founded before the Armenian genocide and still exists today. The choir feels committed to the musical heritage of the Armenian people because music is one of the few cultural assets that was saved after the genocide.

*KOUSAN has a long history. Please tell us a little bit about it.*

KOUSAN was founded in 1910 by the great Armenian priest-musician Komitas Vardapet in Constantinople and in 1911 in Alexandria. His aim was to establish a national Armenian conservatory. By the time of the Armenian genocide in 1915, he had managed to recruit 300 singers for it. Later, Parsegh Ganatchian, another great Armenian musician who, among other things, composed the Armenian national anthem, continued this work in various regions of the Middle East. In 1932, he came to Beirut, where he was joined by former KOUSAN

choristers. Today, Hamaskaine, the Armenian Society for Education and Culture, is the choir's sponsor.

choristers. Today, Hamaskaine, the Armenian Society for Education and Culture, is the choir's sponsor.

*What does „Kousan“ mean?*

„Kousan“ means something like „he who tells a story“. It can be a love story, a story about the people or about nature.



And everything is accompanied by music that is appropriate to the context. Sometimes Kousan is also written Gusan, Kusan or Koussan, depending on how Armenian is transcribed.

*Who sings in the choir today?*

There are 60 people singing today: Armenian musicians, music students or people with a good voice who know that music is a fundamental part of Armenian life. Some are from the same family. The youngest member is 17 years old, the oldest singer is almost 60.

*Are there also singers in the choir who have no Armenian roots?*

There are non-Armenian singers who love Armenian music and are impressed



**Komitas Vardapet**  
founded the choir in 1910.

KOUSAN wants to preserve the Armenian cultural heritage in the tradition of its founder.



by the great musician Komitas. For them, it is a great honour to sing in his choir.

*The choir is dedicated to Armenian music. Why?*

As with traditional dancing, Armenian music is a cultural heritage dear to the hearts of Armenians. After the genocide in 1915, the intangible cultural heritage of the Armenians became all the more important because it was the only testimony that they still existed as a people. KOUSAN is committed to this non-material cultural heritage. Armenian music has existed since ancient times but it was not very well known. Komitas founded KOUSAN to make it better known.

*Does the choir also sing non-Armenian songs?*

Komitas himself also composed German songs when he studied in Berlin. KOUSAN now sings in many languages: Arabic, Syriac, French, English, Greek and German.

*What is your favourite piece of music?*

The wedding songs because the melodies and the harmonies are pure Armenian and they represent the joy of marriage. They reflect the festive side of the life of the Armenian people.

*What is it like for KOUSAN today to make music in a Lebanon that does not offer good prospects for people?*

Lebanon is a multicultural country. And the diversity of its population provides a harmonious and richly colourful



KOUSAN

In 1910, the newly founded choir posed for a group picture in Constantinople.

landscape. Armenians who are part of the Lebanese people have a rich culture inherited from their ancestors who had to leave their homeland because of the genocide. We want to preserve and protect this culture. That's why the choir strives to continue despite all the circumstances.

*Zella Kadouzian and Garen Yosolkian conducted the interview with choir director Krikor Alozian. The choir has a YouTube channel under „KOUSAN Chamber Choir“.*

## Saviour of Armenian music

Komitas Vardapet is considered the saviour of Armenian music. Born in 1869 as Soghomon Gevorki Soghomonian, he lost both his parents at an early age. A clergyman took him to Echmiadzin, seat of the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, where he received an education. In 1893, he became a monk and took the name Komitas. Two years later, he became a priest and received the title Vardapet, which means doctor or scholar in Armenian. Komitas went to Tiflis and Berlin for further studies.

After returning to Echmiadzin in 1899, he began to travel across the country, collecting a variety of Armenian folk songs and dances in the villages. He invented his own notation system with which he precisely documented these melodies, some of which had been handed down orally for centuries. Komitas collected about 3,000 songs.

In 1910, Komitas went to Constantinople, where he founded the Kousan Choir, so introducing many Armenians to their music for the first time.

On “Red Sunday”, 24 April 1915, the beginning of the state-organised genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, he was arrested in Constantinople together with several hundred other Armenian intellectuals and deported to Çankırı (east of Ankara). While almost all the other deportees were murdered there, Interior Minister Talaat Pasha ordered the return of eight prisoners, including Komitas. But on his return, he found that his valuable collection of songs had been destroyed.

Komitas Vardapet could not recover from what had happened. In 1919, friends took him to France. Until his death in 1935, he lived in complete seclusion in the psychiatric hospital in Villejuif. Komitas Vardapet is buried in Yerevan.

kb



## Having a coffee with Schneller friends

What Felix Weiss takes with him from four years at the Middle East Liaison Desk

**After four years, Felix Weiss is moving from the Middle East Liaison Desk to the finance management unit of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).**

*What did you enjoy most during your four years at the Middle East Liaison Desk?*

It's hard to say what I enjoyed the most. I think the most interesting part was probably working together with members of the association. The fascination and passion that our members have for the Schneller Schools and the Schneller Association were often contagious. Working in the team with Katja Buck and Uwe Gräbe was also full of cheerfulness and collegiality.

*What were your expectations or fears when you started four years ago?*

As a former volunteer in Lebanon, I was very familiar with daily life at the school and boarding home at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School. So, when I started my position in 2019, I was all the more excited to see what work behind the scenes would be like. It was also particularly interesting to communicate with our international cooperation partners. Much of what I experienced and learned here I will take with me to my new job. But I can't deny that at the time, I secretly hoped to be allowed to travel on a business trip to the Middle East at least once. In November 2019, I was finally able to visit the Schneller schools again since my volunteer year in 2011 and see what had happened since then. I will always remember this wonderful visit.

*Joscha Quade is your successor at the Middle East Liaison Desk. What can he look forward to?*

When I first took up my post, I introduced myself in the Schneller magazine. As soon as the magazine appeared, EVS members called or wrote letters telling me their Schneller story. Some even invited me for coffee. This made me realise how far back the history of the Schneller schools and the Syrian Orphanage goes and how many people are still connected to the schools. I have also always enjoyed our events, such as the annual General Meeting or our stand at the Church

Chr. Hildebrandt-Ayasse



**Felix Weiß and Uwe Gräbe  
above the rooftops of Jerusalem:**

Congress in Dortmund, because you can talk to so many members of the association there. That's why I very much envy my successor.

*What are you looking forward to in your new job?*

As a business economist, I love numbers. As the new head of the financial management unit at the EMS, I can live this out more and delve deeper into it. It may sound very dry and colourless compared to the work at the Middle East Liaison Desk, but what can I say, "if you're not good at anything, become an economist"... or a business economist in my case.

## Jerusalem Archbishop guest at the Schneller Festival

Schneller Association elects new Executive Committee

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) was finally able to hold its annual General Meeting in person again. After two years during which the Association was only able to meet online due to the pandemic, more than 50 members from far and wide flocked to the Luther congregation in Fellbach for the Schneller Festival on 18 September.

Members from the worldwide EMS community, who were already in Germany for the 50th anniversary of the EMS, also attended the morning service to hear the sermon of the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, Hosam Naoum. The Archbishop preached on the healing of the ten lepers and emphasised the importance of cultivating an attitude of gratitude in all areas of life and faith.

Rev. Khaled Freij, Director of the Theodor Schneller School in Amman which belongs to the Anglican Diocese in Jerusalem, made it clear how grateful the EVS can be for the work carried out locally at the Schneller schools. In his speech, he described how the school continued to develop even during the pandemic by utilising its own digital platform. This allowed the school to continue reaching all students despite months of lockdown and offer new training courses, make important purchases for the vocational training department and complete vital refurbishment work on the grounds. Freij also explained that the TSS is now part of a large network of support and advisory organisations and institutions, such as the German Jordanian University, the Goethe-Institut, the German Society for International Co-

operation, the Jordanian Ministry of Education and Social Affairs and the local school authorities.

The Lutheran congregation in Fellbach proved to be wonderful hosts. Johanna Schneller came from Fellbach. She was the wife of Theodor Schneller who succeeded his father Johann Ludwig in running the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 20th century. The Orphanage preceded the two Schneller schools in Jordan and Lebanon. At the following lunch and the actual General Meeting held in the Paul Gerhardt Parish House, everyone had the chance to talk in a relaxed atmosphere with the Archbishop, his Canon Donald Binder who had travelled with him, and with Reverend Khaled Freij.

The financial report for 2021 was improved and the Executive Committee was discharged unanimously. The Association also elected a new Executive Committee for the next five years. New members of the committee include Jutta Herold, Reverend Christoph Hildebrand-Ayasse, Hans-Joachim Jetter and Lisa Schnotz. Musa Al-Munaizel, Reverend Bernd Apel, Dr Silvan Eppinger, Christian Kissling,





The new board of the Schneller Association, from left to right: Christoph Hildebrandt-Ayasse, Jutta Herold, Lisa Schnotz, Musa Al-Munaizel, Kerstin Sommer, Christian Kißling, Anselm Kreh, Hans-Joachim Jetter, Silvan Eppinger, Bernd Apel. Squatting in front, Uwe Gräbe.

EMS/Buck

Anselm Kreh and Kerstin Sommer were re-elected. Rev. Susanne Gölz, Rev. Christian Kurzke, Dr Reinhold Schaal and Martina Waiblinger have stepped down after decades of service on the committee.

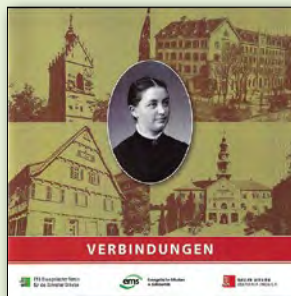
Following a change in the constitution, the directors of the two Schneller schools are now full voting members with a seat on the Association's Executive Committee. Similarly, the EVS and the EMS each have a seat on the local administrative boards of the two schools in Jordan and Lebanon. On the evening before the General Meeting, a meeting of the otherwise "old" Executive Committee took place, attended by both directors: Khaled Freij in person, and George Haddad from the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon via video conference. Both participated wholeheartedly in the debates, which will now take place in English. The measures demonstrate that the EVS as a member organisation is systematically putting the internationalisation of the EMS into practice, even if it initially means changes for some members of the association.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## New publication

At the festive service at the Luther Church in Fellbach, Theo Lorenz and Siegfried Bihler presented their new publication "Verbindungen" (Connections) about Johanna Schneller (1864-1946), the wife of Theodor Schneller, the second director of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem.

In cooperation with the Evangelical Congregation of Fellbach and Fellbach City Museum, they documented the relationships between the city, the Basel Mission and Schneller work



on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the EMS and the EVS General Meeting 2022 in Fellbach.

The key figures are the two Fellbach inhabitants Johanna Schneller, née Allmendinger, and Reverend Karl Friedrich Werner (1804-1872), who had close ties to the Basel Mission and also supported the founding of the Syrian Orphanage from Fellbach. The attractively designed booklet is available from the City Museum at [stadtmuseum@fellbach.de](mailto:stadtmuseum@fellbach.de)

## An ecumenical finale to the summer

### Ecumenical events inspired by the Middle East

**The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) is obviously regarded as a competent authority in the ecumenical community on issues relating to Christian life in the Middle East. It was involved in two high-level ecumenical events this summer.**

First, in August, the EVS Executive Secretary attended a workshop of the German Catholic Bishops' Conference (DBK) with the authors of the document "We Choose Abundant Life" (see Schneller Magazine 1/2022). For the authors from Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, the choice of "life (in abundance)" (according to Deuteronomy 30:19 and John 10:10) is closely linked to the concept of participation, in other words, the equal participation of all citizens in the "civil state" and of all Christians in their church through the principle of "synodality". It was at this point that the Catholic participants from Germany in Berlin listened with particular interest. Had they not been told time and again that the "Synodal Path" in their church was a separate German path that was not supported by the World Church? But here were brothers and sisters from the Middle East who were themselves pushing for synodality based on ecumenical principles.

For example, the reports by Viola Raheb were captivating. She is a Palestinian theologian and educator who lives in Austria. She heads a project of the "Pro Oriente" Foundation which organises ecumenical consultations of young people in Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine in order to actively develop the

church across denominational borders. On the other hand, a model such as the one presented by the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) also attracted a great deal of interest from Arab delegates since it presents a practised form of participation which is expressed in the sharing of spiritual, human and material resources.

At the beginning of September, the EVS had the privilege to host a workshop at the Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Karlsruhe on the issue of how Christian educational institutions in the Middle East can contribute to empowering young people to deal with the many current crises and to build a better future. Rev. Najla Kassab from Lebanon, President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, made it clear that churches cannot evade this issue. In Lebanon, which is experiencing one of the worst economic crises in the world, about two-thirds of all children are educated in private schools, the majority of which are run by churches. Rev. Kassab presented the principles of building bridges between different communities, transferring values, mediation and participation, also by children from poor families. She said these were the cornerstones of church school work in the Middle East. On the other hand, Rev. George Haddad, who joined the conference by via video, illustrated this by the example of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon.

Finally, Sally Azar gave an example of a successful educational career shaped by Christian institutions. She is currently a vicar in Berlin and youth delegate of the





Splendid setting for such an important topic as “Christian Educational Institutions in the Middle East”: The EVS hosted its workshop during the WCC Assembly at the Karlsruhe Schloss.

Lutheran World Federation to the WCC Assembly. She will be ordained in January in Jerusalem as the first woman pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL).

The way in which Christian educational institutions in the Middle East are also an integral part of international ecumenical networks was finally made clear by Lisa Schnotz’s presentation. She is a former volunteer at the Theodor Schneller School in Jordan and recently became a member on the Board of the EVS. She asked critical questions about what international supporters in the Middle East can do and what they should not do. Without a doubt, Christian brothers and sisters in

countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine have their own answers to the enormous challenges they face in their regions. They are doing this more and more with ecumenical openness and asking overtly critical questions about traditional structures and institutions. There is no doubt that it is an exciting and gratifying privilege for Christians in Germany to be able to experience this in close companionship with their partners in the Middle East.

*Uwe Gräbe*

## Learning the “proper” way to swing your hipst

### Alumni reminisce

**Ruth Maurer is a pastor and hospital chaplain in Stuttgart. After finishing secondary school in Germany, the 32-year-old went on a voluntary year at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. She was very impressed by the girls she spent her days with during her stay.**



**Ruth Maurer carries a girl piggyback across the grounds.**

» I fondly remember how lovely the “go-to-bed time” was. The girls would get ready for bed and when they were all in their beds, I would go back to each of them and say “Gute Nacht” (goodnight). This was always a very special moment and a moving way to end the day. Afterwards, I used to go to our little kitchen and we volunteers grabbed a burger and a fruit shake as a kind of reward for the day and talked about what had happened during the day.

It was also great fun when we didn’t go to the playground in the afternoon because the weather was cold, but instead turned on the TV to a music channel or one of the girls got the drum. Then we danced together. The only thing was my hip swing was not round enough, so the girls always had to show me how to do it “properly”.

I was very impressed how self-confident many of the girls were. Whenever it came to cleaning their rooms, the girls always pitched in and did a lot on their own. I would never have expected that from children between the ages of four and twelve. What amazed me was how little the girls knew about animals. In my time, there was a small petting zoo at the TSS.

But my girls didn’t really want to pet the bunnies. They were rather afraid of them.

I would love to see the girls I spent every day with again. They were still so young then. They didn’t have Facebook or anything like that. We couldn’t keep in touch. But I would like to know what happened to them. The time in Jordan made an enormous impression on me. I made good friends and had many experiences, not to mention I became sensitised to different cultures. I also think the concept of peace education is good. I think many children benefit from their time at the TSS.

For any young adults who also want to do voluntary service at the TSS, I would advise them to at least learn a little Arabic beforehand. We learned a lot while we were there but it would have been easier if we had known more before. And what I can definitely recommend is to try warm pita bread with za’tr and black tea on Sundays for breakfast. «

## Oriental Church Calendar 2023

The Stuttgart Arab Evangelical Congregation is once again publishing „a calendar to inspire wonder, prayer and build bridges“ for the coming year. The DIN A4 calendar „Christian Orient Today“ shows photos of Christian sites, churches and symbols in the Middle East.



ing year. The DIN A4 calendar „Christian Orient Today“ shows photos of Christian sites, churches and symbols in the Middle East.

Explanatory texts in four languages (German, English, French, Arabic) explain the situation of Christians in each of the countries.

Once again, it becomes abundantly clear how rooted Christianity is in the Orient, what tragedies have occurred in the past and present, but also how rich and alive the Christian faith is even today in the Orient.

You can order the calendar for € 7 (reduced prices for 10 copies or more) by e-mail from [heidi.josua@arabic-church.com](mailto:heidi.josua@arabic-church.com) or from the Arab Evangelical Congregation Postfach 63 71550 Weissach im Tal Germany

## Readers' letters

Response to Schneller Magazine 3/2022  
“Pilgrims and tourists“

I just unpacked the new Schneller magazine and read the article by Johanan Flusser. I find it very appropriate for these days of Sukkot. Then there's the article with the photo of Archbishop Hosam Naoum! Despite everything, there are some flashes of hope here and there. THANK YOU for the entire issue and the very useful articles.

*Rev. Christoph Knoch, Switzerland*

Once again you have succeeded in producing a beautiful issue on the subject of pilgrimage. It allows readers to go on pilgrimage to the various holy places, side by side with so many different people who live in and around the sites in the countries of the Middle East. It shows culture, spirituality and living religiosity that go beyond the overriding focus on problems in the media but refrains from trivialising issues.

*Prof. Dr Johannes Lähmann, Goslar*



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The Schneller Magazine is also available in German and can be read online:  
<https://schneller-schulen.ems-online.org>



*You are the God who sees me.*

Genesis 16,13 (annual watchword 2023)



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