

SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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Love Letters

to Christians in the Middle East

Extra:
Quo Vadis
Lebanon?

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Front cover: Children at the Johann Schneller school in Lebanon (EMS/Waiblinger)

Back cover: Tryptikon in the Chapel of Ananias in Damascus (Katja Dorothea Buck)

Dear Reader,

with this issue, I am bidding farewell after 23 years as editor-in-chief of the Schneller Magazine. I had the privilege of planning and producing a total of 81 issues. Looking back, I can recall the many individual encounters and conversations I have had over the years. What a wealth of memories! Read about how much this work has shaped me personally on page 21. It has become a somewhat lengthy “love letter to our brothers and sisters in the Middle East”.



Others have also experienced how much an involvement with living Christianity in the Middle East opens one's eyes to new horizons, how it arouses curiosity about a church history that goes back much further than the Reformation, how it sensitises a person to other religions and repeatedly touches on the central issues of the Christian faith.

In this issue, people who are in close contact with Middle Eastern Christians in very different contexts write about why their brothers and sisters in faith have become important to them. You may have already noticed that this issue is thicker than usual. There is a simple explanation for this. Since my departure means that some internal matters need to be clarified and this takes time, we have decided to publish the September and December issues of Schneller Magazine as a double issue. In addition to the “love letters”, you will therefore find a second special feature entitled “Quo vadis Lebanon?”. Here, a number of authors from Lebanon write about where they see their country after so many years of political and economic crisis and amid the new power balance in the region.

Now, for the last time, I would like to wish you all an enjoyable read of the Schneller Magazine. Please stay connected to the magazine and the schools. I, for one, will do so.

With best wishes for a blessed Advent season
Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katja Dorothea Buck". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Katja Dorothea Buck

The birth of the Son of God in our hearts

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them ... and said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.'

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child

Luke 2:7-11 and 17 (NRSV)

When we read these words today, we realise there is usually no place in the world where the Son of God can be born. That is, unless people make an effort to prepare a place for him. The birth of the Son of God may seem scandalous, like something that is not really desired or wanted in this world. So those who accept the Son of God or make a place for him are already outside the boundaries set by the world. Then we read in the Gospel of Matthew that Joseph and Mary had to flee with the child to escape from King Herod, who, in his lust for power and blind rage, had ordered the murder of all little boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

However, none of this prevents the good news of the birth of the Son of God from reaching the shepherds and also us today, after so many years.

After all, is it not true that the birth of every child always brings joy and with it a kind of honour? It is the joy of the possibility of a new beginning, a new life. The newborn child makes us aware that a new beginning is also possible for us. We must then be prepared to start everything anew. It is as if we ourselves were born with the child, or as if the child's birth took place in our hearts, so that we ourselves must learn everything afresh with him or her. We can then experience childhood with the child and become children ourselves.

It is a joy and an honour to watch over a child; a child who, no matter how small or fragile he or she may be, becomes a



Jesus is the child who is allowed to be born in our hearts. Modern olive wood sculpture from Bethlehem.

With a newborn child, we are no longer alone, but always within a community; a community that gives our lives a meaning that we want to live for. This is no ordinary happiness, but a joy that harbours hope within it. The hope that we too will grow up to be something good with this newborn child, as good as the newborn.

What if a child were born in our hearts every day? Then Christmas becomes a celebration for every day.

source of strength and courage for us, courage that heals wounds and allows us to take the next steps in life. The birth of a child in our lives, in our hearts, makes us affectionate and considerate, so that we can take care of the child's needs. We have to care for the child because he or she is unable to care for himself or herself. So we learn to be alert and caring.

This makes us an authentic, caring being in this world. We carry within us the potential to be whole—as human beings or as a person who is there for others. Thus, through the birth of a child, we are given an identity, namely our true identity, the best we can be and want to be.

Dear readers, the Son is the Word of the Father, so that the Father speaks to us through the Son. The birth of the Son of God in our hearts makes us daughters and sons of God. The joy of Christmas is that God is born in man. Whenever we hear the Word, we will respond with our words, as the shepherds did. For Jesus is the child who is allowed to be born in our hearts. Let us prepare a place for him in this beautiful Christmas season, like Mary and Joseph, and receive him like the shepherds. Amen.

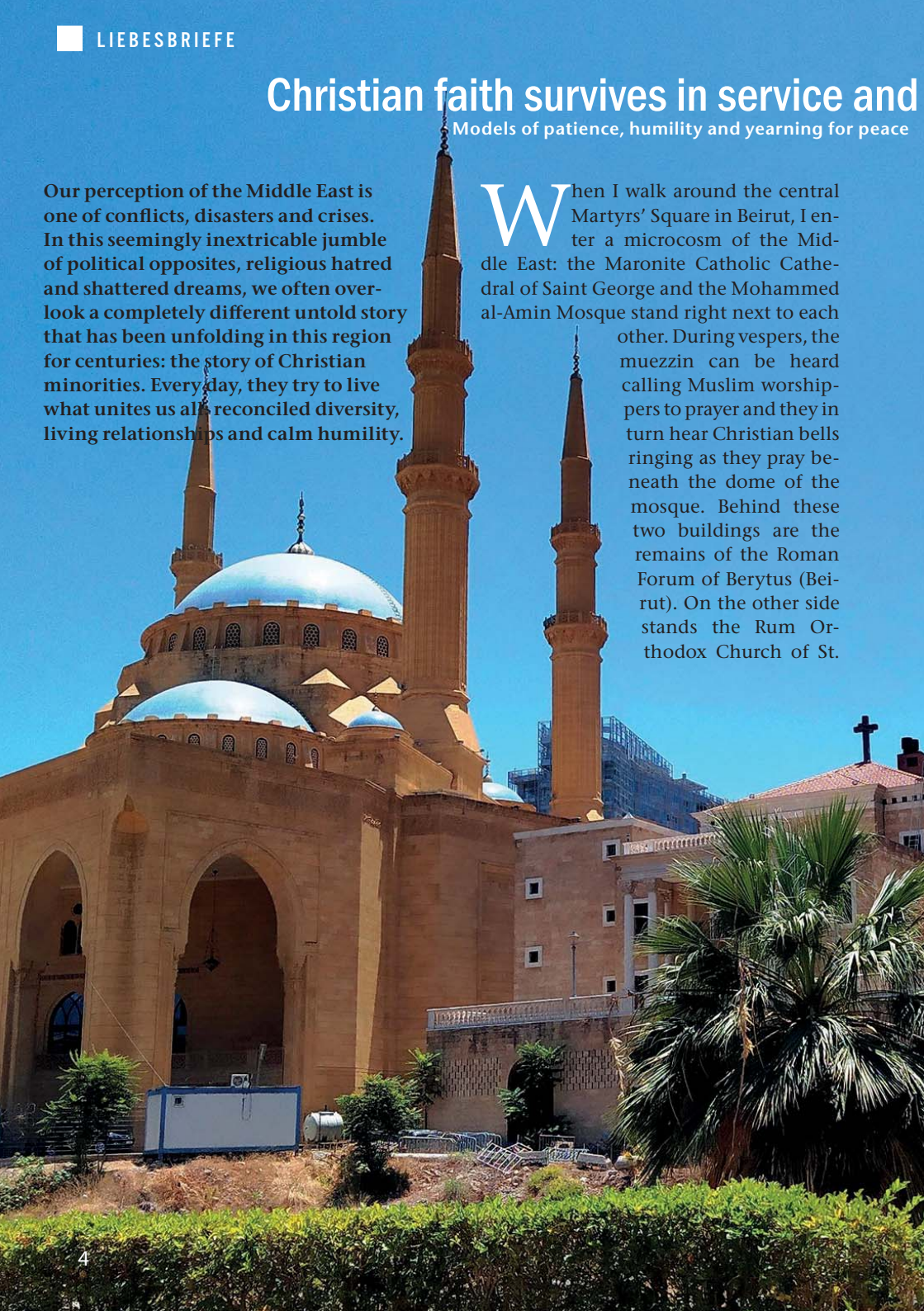
Dr Sylvie Avakian is pastor in Stuttgart-Heslach and private lecturer at the University of Tübingen.

Christian faith survives in service and

Models of patience, humility and yearning for peace

Our perception of the Middle East is one of conflicts, disasters and crises. In this seemingly inextricable jumble of political opposites, religious hatred and shattered dreams, we often overlook a completely different untold story that has been unfolding in this region for centuries: the story of Christian minorities. Every day, they try to live what unites us all: reconciled diversity, living relationships and calm humility.

When I walk around the central Martyrs' Square in Beirut, I enter a microcosm of the Middle East: the Maronite Catholic Cathedral of Saint George and the Mohammed al-Amin Mosque stand right next to each other. During vespers, the muezzin can be heard calling Muslim worshippers to prayer and they in turn hear Christian bells ringing as they pray beneath the dome of the mosque. Behind these two buildings are the remains of the Roman Forum of Berytus (Beirut). On the other side stands the Rum Orthodox Church of St.



perseverance

George and next to it is the Melkite Greek Catholic Church of St. Elias.

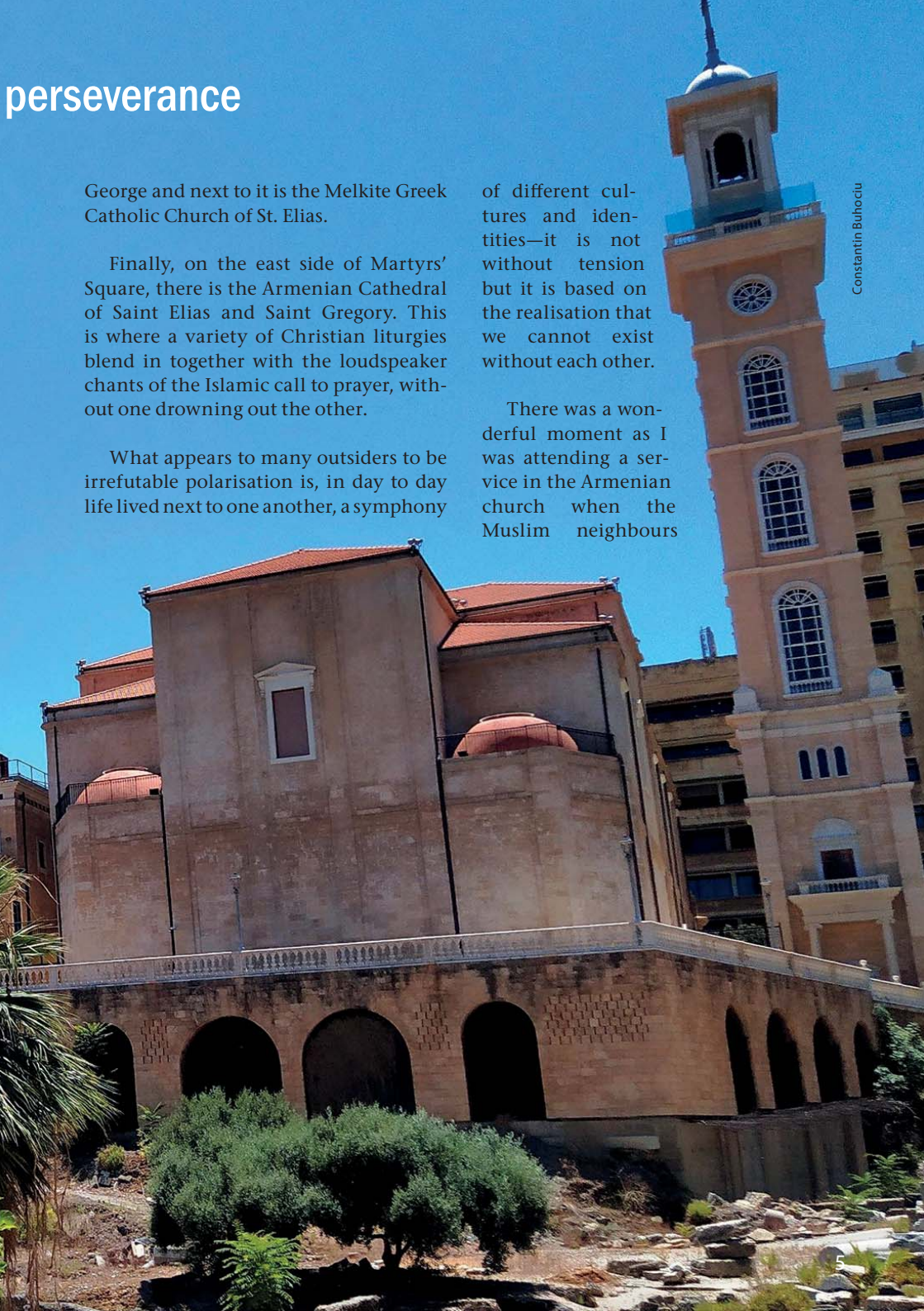
Finally, on the east side of Martyrs' Square, there is the Armenian Cathedral of Saint Elias and Saint Gregory. This is where a variety of Christian liturgies blend in together with the loudspeaker chants of the Islamic call to prayer, without one drowning out the other.

What appears to many outsiders to be irrefutable polarisation is, in day to day life lived next to one another, a symphony

of different cultures and identities—it is not without tension but it is based on the realisation that we cannot exist without each other.

There was a wonderful moment as I was attending a service in the Armenian church when the Muslim neighbours

Constantin Buhociu



brought biscuits for Eid al-Fitr [Ed.: Sugar Feast marking the end of Ramadan] and the priest congratulated them on breaking their fast. It is this togetherness that demands no uniformity but strives for a reconciled diversity. You Christians in the Middle East know that dialogue does not mean concealing your differences but consists of simply living together.

We can learn from you that Christians must seek unity in diversity and that, in dialogue with people of other faiths, they embody a hope for peace that goes far beyond any political agenda. Your ability to endure conflict and yet be a voice for minority rights, dignity and humanity is a testimony that can also serve as a guide for us in Germany.

In Wadi Qadisha, which was the seat of the Maronite Patriarch from 1440 to 1823, one can still feel the deep spirituality that is the essence of Eastern Christianity. It



The monastery of Qannoubine. Steel engraving by Dieudonné Auguste Lancelot (1861)



Unity in diversity:
a Muslim girls' choir
sings a song in honour
of Mary, the mother
of Jesus, at the Taizé
youth meeting in
Beirut in spring 2019.



is not a magnificent palace but an inconspicuous monastery, Qannoubine, hidden amid steep rock cliffs, that was the centre of this ancient church for almost 400 years. Throughout the centuries, it has stood as a testimony to silent perse-



The Church does not depend on the manifestation of power and splendour. Small chapel in Byblos/Libanon.

In Wadi Qadisha, you also learn that the Church does not depend on displays of pomp and power. The patriarch's throne room is only the size of a living room. The Church is based more on refuge and service. Our brothers and sisters in the East teach us that faith survives neither in triumph nor in retreat, but in service and perseverance. In times of uncertainty, this requires endless patience.

Your existence, dear sisters and brothers in the Middle East, is far more than a footnote in history. You preserve the birthplace of the Gospel, contribute to reconciliation in your societies, and are our role models in patience, humility and our longing for peace. Amidst uncertainty and threat, you live what the Church is always seeking anew: community in diversity, openness to others and being rooted in God. Your life stories show us that personal contact and genuine relationships go further than any political slogan.

At a time when polarisation and attributes stifle conversation, you invite us not to emphasise our differences but to remain searching and loving brothers and sisters together. Your witness is our heritage and our hope.

Constantin Buhociu is Chair of the Working Group of Christian Churches (ACK) in Tübingen. He is a member of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Germany.



Katja Dorothea Buck

verance: those seeking shelter were welcomed and prayers were offered when the world outside was in turmoil—close to the people and humbly close to the origins of the faith. It is this humility that fills our ecumenism with life.

Ancient texts shine light on the here and now

A tribute to the living theology of the “Oriens Christianus”

As a university lecturer, I am often asked how I came to focus my research on the Christian Orient. The question is usually asked with a tone of astonishment, like how could anyone choose such a rather obscure field of study. I respond in a friendly yet firm tone, pointing out that, at least to me, my field of research is by no means obscure or a niche subject.

When I really get up steam, I add my thoughts on who could actually presume to have the authority to say what should be considered central or peripheral in the subject of church history. To put it more bluntly, I ask whether there are not any remnants of strict colonialism at work when the history of Christianity outside Europe is fundamentally accorded only secondary importance.

Once these fronts have been established and my interlocutor continues to show interest in the topic, I am happy to begin telling my story. How, as a student, I was attracted to the languages and literatures of the Christian Orient; how I heard a voice of authentic Christian tradition in the poems of Ephrem the Syrian; how I was enchanted by my first visits to Oriental liturgies, even though I was hardly able to follow everything that was happening.

I then relate in greater detail on what ultimately gave me the crucial incentive to devote myself entirely to the “Oriens Christianus”: my encounters with Oriental Christians themselves. As a student in Munich, it was the Egyptian fruit and

vegetable seller who had his shop around the corner. One day, I asked him about a small icon of Saint Damiana sitting behind the cash register. He was amazed and delighted that a customer had ever heard of the Coptic Church.

This was followed by an invitation to the community. A short time later, I was part of a Coptic tour group from Munich that flew to Cairo for the episcopal consecration of their pastor, Amba Damian. During the consecration service in St. Mark’s Cathedral, I experienced unforgettable moments of intense religiosity, and above all, there was incredible hospitality.

I cannot imagine my work on Oriental church history without the testimony of faith of Oriental Christians. Both come together in professional exchanges with theological institutions in the Middle East. One thing must be emphasised: the Middle East is also a region of lively theological research and teaching!

I met Dominican nuns who had earned their doctorates at Oxford and who were part of the teaching staff at the so-called ‘Babel College’, the Catholic theological college in Erbil. Under the skies of northern Mesopotamia, some of the most profound mystical texts in the entire Christian tradition were written in the 7th and 8th centuries. What a blessing it was to be able to discuss authors such as Isaac the Syrian or John of Dalyatha with colleagues there. These accounts of experiencing God’s presence still give a person strength today.



The icon of Saint Damiana, who is venerated in the Coptic Church for her steadfastness. During the persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian, she was brutally tortured and finally beheaded—together with her companions and 400 other Christians.

intellectual Glass Bead Game. However, there it helps to achieve a deeper meaning and a contemporary updating of one's own tradition.

The study of the Church Fathers, which I had the opportunity to encounter at the Patristic Institute of the Coptic Church in Cairo, is also of existential importance. My colleague Michael Ghattas invited me to give lectures, which always attract a lively group of theologians and non-theologians who share a keen interest in the teachings of the Church Fathers. What Cyril of Alexandria had to say in the 5th century still resonates there today. Under sometimes difficult conditions, the institute's team has succeeded in translating Cyril's monumental work into Arabic. The Church Father should not only be revered, but also read.

Last year, I combined the lecture in Cairo with a trip to the monastery of St. Damiana. Standing before her tomb, which attracts pilgrims from near and far, it seemed to me as if a circle had been closed... Among many other things, this should also be mentioned in my "love letter to the Christians of the Middle East".

Karl Pinggéra is Professor of Church History in Marburg.

The theological faculties of Lebanon speak several languages. In the distinguished manner of the French intellectual tradition, the Syrian Church Fathers are studied at the faculty of the Lebanese Maronite Order in Kaslik. There, I learned to understand Ephrem's pictorial thinking with Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols. In the context of a theological faculty in our country, this would only amount to an

Dear sisters and brothers in the Middle East,

the fragrance of Jerusalem has been wafting through my flat since my visit at the end of January. I was already sitting in the car, ready to go to the tram, when Sally Azar pressed a bag of incense and a brass bowl into my hand. What a very precious sign of affection! The embers of hope for peace and the spirit of longing for justice for all permeate our togetherness. Earlier, we had celebrated a service together on the Mount of Olives. I am truly impressed by your steadfastness in faith and by how, even in the most difficult situations, you do not let your faith, hope and humour be taken away from you.

The incense bowl stands in my home next to a large carving of the Holy Family made of olive wood which I also bought in Bethlehem at the end of January, and next to the pomegranate-shaped vase that the students at Talitha Kumi gave me with their words of hope when I left. The old gnarled wood and the concerns of those who earn their living off pilgrims in Bethlehem have found a place in my home.

I also often think with concern of our sisters and brothers in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, and in various places in the Holy Land as I pray for them with the words ringing in my ears, "Tell others about us, don't forget us!" Yes, we will—we will tell others, remember and look out for them. And pray. For peace and for you to be safe. I so very much hope that at some point it will be possible for more and more people to open their ears and hearts to the painful stories of other





Maundy Thursday procession
in Jerusalem.

people. I do not have the right, nor am I in a position, to demand this.

But I am deeply convinced that this silence must also be broken. The divisions and the ever-higher walls around you weigh heavily down on you and often make it difficult even for us to find the right words—or any words at all. That is why the most important thing is that we meet each other. That we see each other, that we share what is happening on WhatsApp and Facebook.

As Christian sisters and brothers in the Middle East, you are a powerful sign to me of how much strength and encouragement can come from churches that are small in number—seeds of hope for peace and for the possibility of different people living side by side and together, hand in hand. And what a treasure the different Christian churches are. The drawing together of the Eastern and Western churches, joint prayer by Christians of different denominations in the places that are also the cradle of Christianity—all this is a powerful sign of hope that transcends all pain. And of the rejection of all violence and terror.

Your voices and your prayers are important and make a difference—in the Middle East and throughout the world. This is why I love you and I am so grateful for our deep bond—fragrant, strong and directed towards the future of the peace promised by God.

Yours,
*Heike Springhart, Bishop of the Protestant Church
in Baden*

“I want to follow your example of courage”

A love letter to Christians in the Middle East

Ever since I spent an academic year at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Lebanon in 2010/11, you have never left my thoughts. The honour of getting to know the Middle East and some of you personally has greatly changed my approach to theology and my view of life. For me, theology is no longer a theoretical and intellectual exercise but an anchor and guidance in my everyday life.

My encounter with you has enhanced the awareness of my own German Lutheran identity. You come from a completely different context and belong to other denominations. You have shown me how diverse the different traditions and forms of Christianity are and how important and enriching sisterly and brotherly cooperation in ecumenism can be for each and every one of us—even if it is sometimes exhausting to endure one another.

You have shown me how beautiful and steeped in history the Middle East is, how different people have lived side by side for centuries, how delicious hummus, falafel, tabbouleh, shawarma, kibbeh and stuffed vine leaves taste, and how wonderful it is to attend an Orthodox service and celebrate the mystery of faith in the Eucharist.

Through living with you, I have learned to allow contradictions and differ-

ent perspectives to coexist without having to harmonise them. As a minority within a minority living in uncertain circumstances, you have made me realise how privileged I am to have grown up in a safe environment without war or violence and as part of the German majority society. I can travel wherever I want and return to my home whenever I want. I don't have to worry about whether my family is safe.

Your situation makes me realise how threatened followers of Christianity are in this world and that it does matter how German politicians stand on foreign pol-

Sometimes it is also healing to simply be able to go on an outing together.
Photo of the German-Middle Eastern conference group in Erfurt.



icy issues; on the contrary, their decisions have very concrete consequences on which human lives depend.

At the beginning of June this year, I was able to take part in a consultation between the SiMO and the NEST in Erfurt. Due to the political situation in the Middle East, the study programme has not really been able to take place for several years in a row. In our Lebanese-Syrian-Palestinian-German group, we cried together, dared to talk about post-Shoah theologies and decolonising theology; we heard different perspectives and were able to let them

stand, talked late into the night and finally celebrated 25 years of the SiMO. It was so healing to be able to meet again and to learn how many of you are doing right now, what challenges you face and how you are dealing with them.

Through your service as pastors and school directors, you are providing an invaluable service to the societies in which you live.

You have shown me once again how faith in our Lord Jesus Christ can be sustainable, even and especially in times of existential need. You have become my role models in faith—you who, despite daily threats and bombings, do not lose hope and continue to work for peace, education and constructive coexistence between people of different faiths in your societies.

I want to follow your example of courage and resilience and work both in my own context and to connect Christians around the world. Your resilience, your energy and your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ have impressed me so much for many years! You are my role models in every respect! I would like to bring your perspectives to Germany so that you can be seen and heard here too.

Anna-Katharina Diehl is a congregation pastor in Göttingen and Chair of the “Freunde der NEST” Association (Friends of NEST). Through the Study Programme in the Middle East (SiMO), she spent a year studying, learning and living together with Christians from the Middle East at the NEST.



Anna-Katharina Diehl

Because they embody hope

Love letter to our Protestant sisters and brothers in the Middle East

The request to write a love letter to our sisters and brothers in faith in the Middle East is beautiful, but also unusual. Normally, love letters should be discreet. After all, they contain strong and intimate feelings that are not meant to be aired in public. But now I am asked to explain to as many people as possible why you are so dear, valuable and important to me. This is not possible to express in abstract terms.

First of all, I think of all the people with whom I have the privilege of working and exchanging ideas on a regular basis. Even outside of work, we often share our joys and sorrows—in our private lives and in the turmoil of conflicts and crises in your countries. Some of you have become true friends who I can confide in without hesitation. You are all witnesses of Christ, whose commitment and convictions nourish my own faith and motivate me in my ministry.

Most of you belong to the Protestant community which is a very small minority in the Middle East. Yet you are very active and involved in a variety of activities. You draw strength from the diversity of denominations and religions you encounter and you are rooted in different cultures. At the same time, we are united by our Protestant spirituality. Visiting a Protestant church in the Middle East is undoubtedly the least exotic experience a Protestant Christian from the West can have! The liturgy, the order of worship, the hymns—all this are the things that unite us. At the same time, the music in Arabic,

Armenian or Syrian transports me into your world, even if I only understand the meaning of a few words.

This highlights the role you play as a bridge between Eastern realities and the Western world—two universes that are so close and yet so different; that have been intersecting and colliding for centuries without always fully understanding each other.

And yet we share many challenges on both sides of the Mediterranean. Many human, social, political and economic realities unite our societies. The effects of various crises, migration and refugee issues, respect for minorities and human rights, the relationship with Islam, the relationship between politics and religion, climate change—all of these shape our societies, even if the challenges are experienced differently.

The opportunity to discuss these issues with you, to understand your perceptions and to hear your analyses, enables me to see the world through different eyes and to question my own ideas. Personally, I find this very valuable. My contact with you enriches my life. The positive ‘otherness’ that we experience together helps me to grow as a person.

However, there is something more important that goes beyond these issues and it concerns religious life and Christian commitment. You repeatedly point me to a spiritual dimension: hope. This hope is certainly not passive or wait-and-see.



A sign of hope where the horizon seems barred: reconstruction of the Tahera Church in Mosul (Iraq)

Quite the contrary. Your life of faith and your real commitment in the midst of so many crises are testimony to a dynamic hope that both trusts in God and is ready to take risks in loving your neighbour and proclaiming the Gospel.

Even during the war, you are building a new community centre to replace a destroyed church. When danger threatens and many flee, you choose to remain in the service of others. You invest in the future of young people when the present does not allow for any planning. You open a medical clinic even when resources are lacking. You care for the most vulnerable, even when they belong to a different religion. You help others when fanaticism rages.

I admire how your faith leads you to embody the hope that God offers us, even when hope on a human level is meagre and the horizon seems so blocked... as if the stone had been rolled away from the tomb.

I would like to thank you for this hope, lived out in prayer and implemented in so many projects. And I am grateful to God for your witness and for the opportunity to share in it in my own way.

Rev Mathieu Busch is director of Action Chrétienne en Orient (ACO), a French association founded in Strasbourg in 1922 in the wake of the Armenian genocide. Today, the ACO supports Protestant minority churches in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran.

A new perspective on life, the world and our shared faith

A personal thank you to my sisters and brothers in the Middle East

What would I be without my sisters and brothers from the Middle East? And above all, how would I be without them? Of course, any “what if” discussion is doomed to failure from the outset. Life is too surprising and too exciting. So I ask, what would I be missing without my sisters and brothers?

It is the little sayings that I love hearing when I meet my sisters and brothers from the Middle East. They make everyday life easier, bring warmth and closeness to human interaction and express special appreciation.

“Mafi mushkila!”

“That’s no problem at all!” Oh, how good that feels to those of us who always consider all the possible obstacles and eventualities everywhere we go! Almost 20 more relatives turn up unannounced when I visit my sister-in-law. “Mafi mushkila!” She empties the freezer and serves lunch three hours later. Thank you, Lorans, for your mastery in serenity and improvisation!

“Habibti Heidi, wahashtini awi!”

Translated, this means something like, “My darling Heidi, how I have missed you!” Or “Without you, the world was so desolate and empty!” Oh, if only we could hear that every day! In the past, I found Egyptian exuberance a bit too much, even a little embarrassing. Today, I happily join in. And lo and behold, a little floweriness

is good for all intellectual beings. German sobriety meets Oriental warm-heartedness. I think it’s a win-win situation. Thank you, Dora and so many others, for your overwhelming warm-heartedness!

“Mush mumkin? Mumkin!”

“Impossible? No: possible!” Yes, being harassed, being under pressure, that’s everyday reality for Christians in the Middle East, even if the extent and intensity vary from country to country. Churches in Egypt resemble security zones, with roadblocks, identity checks and armed police. Many trade routes are blocked. In the lift, the landlord bombards you with loud recitations from the Qur’an. A planned youth festival receives threats, but the police cannot guarantee security. So the staff simply pitch in, dismantling everything and rebuilding it overnight in the courtyard of a Christian school. The festival goes ahead.

Then there’s the famous rock church at Muqattam in Cairo. Legend has it that it was only constructed because resourceful engineers used the evening cannon shots during Ramadan to mask the blasting work for the church against the general noisy background. Don’t get stuck on the impossibilities and complain, but use the opportunities available creatively.



At the Bishoy monastery in the Natrun Valley

“Ya Yasua!”

“O Jesus!” With a loud and deep sigh, the old Egyptian pastor slumps down on the sofa. Calling on Jesus when you’re dead tired and all your bones ache? Or when there’s a wonderfully delicious breakfast on the table or you finally see an old friend again? It would never have occurred to me before. But hey, you could give it a try. And in fact, that’s when Jesus becomes present in things of everyday life. My everyday things are connected to Jesus—and suddenly take on depth and a new perspective. My faith now permeates all areas of life and is as natural as the air I breathe. And what’s more, the divine world is neither a utopia nor a pipe dream, but a reality here and now; the kingdom of God is real and present. Thank you, Reverend Reda, for your Jesus sigh!

It’s not only that the endearing catch-phrases everyone knows are often exaggerated, or that enrich living together in the Middle East. The way we deal with places and history is also filled and fulfilled.

“Ad-Deir”

“The monastery“. Of course, monasteries are also places of inner reflection for stressed-out people here. But in the Middle East, ad-Deir has another meaning: respect for a place that has preserved and



Faith needs places where the faint presence of past witnesses is felt, as here in the Bishoy monastery in the Natrun Valley.

passed on the faith for centuries; respect for people with a radical lifestyle focused solely on God. When you stand there, you can feel that the faith of the fathers is alive. Then you see the supernatural peace in the faces of the monks. And you understand: faith needs such original sources, places of crystallisation and oases where the faint presence of past witnesses is felt. Thank you, Raafat and Moudy, for opening these doors for me!

And finally, it is the perspective on time and transience that inspires me:

“al-Aba”

“The Fathers (and the Mothers as well)“. Who still cares about their ancestors and forefathers today? When children are given an additional name of a saint or martyr at their baptism, the memory of the fathers and mothers of the faith is preserved. Children and young people are surrounded not only by pop stars but also by spiritual role models. Seeing things from this broad perspective helps to put the present in the right context.

I will never forget my visit to the newly elected Coptic Pope Tawadros II. It was early 2013, during the anti-Christian presidency of Muslim Brother Mursi. When we asked him what life was like now, he replied calmly, “We have had 2000 years of Christianity in Egypt. What is Mursi’s time compared to that?” And he indicated with his fingers a small gap of perhaps 5 cm. A few months later, the Mursi era came to an end... Then he said, “The Gospel of Matthew begins with: “Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” At the end it says: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” We ourselves are in between, held by this beginning and this end.”

Thank you, Baba Tawadros, for this spiritual awareness of history which opens up a window for us to see the end!

Heidi Josua is a religious education teacher and Orientalist. She is Director of the Evangelical Salam Centre and is responsible for church-based diaconal refugee work in the Rems-Murr district near Stuttgart.

The common thread of hope

Farewell and retrospective after many years with the Schneller Magazine

I have been editor-in-chief of the Schneller Magazine for more than twenty years. Now it is time to say good-bye, look back and say thank you.

23 years is a long time in a professional career. For a publication that has been in existence for 140 years, however, it is a relatively short period of time. When I signed my contract at the EMS in Stuttgart in November 2002, I never dreamt that I would remain editor-in-chief of the Schneller Magazine for such a long time. I said to myself you'll do it for three years, five at the most. Anything else would be detrimental to my reputation, I thought at the time. "Mission" is not a subject that will get a young, ambitious and well-educated journalist and

editor very far. But I was interested in the task—taking responsibility for the content and organising a magazine that has something to do with the Middle East.

During my studies in religious and political science, I had focused on the Middle East in every semester and every subject. I had studied Arabic and lived in Cairo for a year. I was interested in "Middle East issues".

I had never heard of the Schneller schools before. I found it exciting that Christians and Muslims lived there together and were prepared for life together, but I was also sceptical. Wouldn't there be missionary work involved there? That would have been a definite no-go



Katja Dorothea Buck with girls at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman.

for me. Not that I don't believe everyone should be free to follow the religion they personally feel most connected to. At the contrary! But how quickly can welfare benefits persuade a (young) person from a broken home to switch religion? In Muslim-majority societies in particular, turning away from Islam can be really dangerous, not only for the individual, but also for an institution or even for the entire religious community to which the convert then belongs.

The people responsible at that time at the Evangelical Association for Schneller Schools (EVS), the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) and the two schools in Lebanon and Jordan were quick to dispel my doubts. I had a memorable conversation with Georges Haddad, the long-standing director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS). "What do we gain by baptising a Muslim child or young adult? We would only have problems and one less advocate," he once replied when asked about proselytising. "As a group small in numbers, we depend on advocates in the majority society who know and appreciate us and who then stand up and speak out when malicious rumours or prejudices are stirred up against us," he explained.

His predecessor, Riad Kassis, put it this way: "Schneller is not an island. We are part of Lebanese society and as such we serve all who belong to this society." There is hardly a better way to express the role that Christians play in the Middle East. They belong there just as they are and con-



Shaking hands with the Pope: Katja Dorothea Buck not only travelled on Schneller business, but also met many interesting people as a freelance journalist.

tribute as they are, no matter how many they are.

But in terms of numbers, they differ considerably from us Christians in Germany, where churches were still called 'people's churches' until a few years ago. But that is precisely what I found and I still find it exciting to read the German context as reflected by the Christians in the Middle East and asking ourselves the relevant questions.

I still remember well one of my first encounters with Habib Badr, Senior Pastor of the National Evangelical Church in Beirut, to which the Johann Ludwig Schneller School belongs. We were standing in front



Among them was Pope Tawadros II., Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church whom she has interviewed several times.

Koptisch-orthodoxes Patriarchat

of his church in the city centre of Beirut. I asked him how many members his church had. There are still about 100 families, he said succinctly. Most of the young people were going abroad because they had better opportunities there. I was taken aback. How could you still be a church with so few people? He looked at me with an elusive smile. "You know, it's not always about quantity. What's more important is that the quality is right. A church is not strong because it has many members."

A few years later, Habib Badr taught me another lesson. The war in Syria had just broken out. Concerns that this war could be the final chapter in 2,000 years of Christian presence in Syria were openly

expressed by various parties. In the winter of 2013, Islamist militiamen had vandalised monasteries and churches in Maalula, one of the last Christian villages where Aramaic is still spoken. Many Christians had fled, leaving everything behind. I asked Habib Badr how one could still speak of hope in the face of this. He hesitated before answering, then said: "I could give you a long theological lecture right now. But I can also put it to you in short words. Hope is when the nuns of the Thekla Convent, who were held hostage by Islamists for three months, start rebuilding their convent the day after their liberation, even though they don't know if it all makes sense. They hope that it does make sense and take action. That is hope."

Yes, the question of hope... It runs like a common thread throughout my 23 years with the Schneller magazine and the topic of Christians in the Middle East. In one of the first issues of the Schneller magazine for which I was responsible, Kamal Farah of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem wrote a contemplation on an ancient icon of Christ from St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai: "For us Christians in the Middle East, it is a special icon. At first glance, it appears to be a depiction of Christ like many others. But if you look closely, you can see that the face is not symmetrical. The right eye is clear, the left is somehow blurred. As if the painter had made a mistake. He deliberately painted one eye with tears. Christ weeps with mankind, feels compassion for them and understands their suffering. But he also looks beyond

the suffering and does not dwell on it. This is what the right eye means, clearly looking straight ahead. It stands for hope."

I have thought about this icon many times during all these years: when I met Coptic Christians in Egypt after the massacre of the 21 martyrs of Sirte in February 2015; in conversations with Christians who had to flee Aleppo in 2013 and eventually found themselves living under the poorest conditions in Beirut; with Lebanese Christians who, despite everything, never tire of believing in their ravaged country; with Armenian Christians, whose collective trauma from the 1915 genocide keeps getting triggered again and again; in encounters with Assyrian and Aramaic Christians in Syria and Iraq, whose communities have suffered so much injustice and persecution over the centuries—something that very few people in this country know about; or in interviews with Christians from Mosul who had to flee from the Islamic State in June 2014 and are now faced with the question of whether they can return. In particular, I am reminded of the icon of Christ when I come into contact with Palestinian Christians. Like their Muslim neighbours, they have experienced decades of injustice, violence and humiliation.

In none of my conversations with Christians in the Middle East have I ever heard words of hatred or a desire for revenge. On the contrary, the question has always been and continues to be what answers the Christian faith has to offer in all these hopeless situations. Christians in the Middle East often provide many of the answers themselves through their prayers, their active support for their neighbours, their educational work and their uncon-

ditional claim to be part of the society in which they live. God looks at his children with both eyes, with one eye that weeps and one that sees clearly.

I would love to list the names of all those I have met and from whom I have been able to obtain personal insights. However, I am



Christ icon (6th century) from St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai

afraid I might forget someone. 23 years is a long time. But I must mention a few by name. Since I have only mentioned men so far, I would like to thank the women who have repeatedly directed my attention to what is essential: to life and to people. From them I have learned that each and every one of us can be of use, no matter where and no matter for whom. The main thing is that it serves life. My thanks go to Rima Nasrallah, Rosangela Jarjour, Mary Jarjour, Liza Titizian, Viviane Brakhia, Linda Macktaby, Mathilde Sabbagh, Najla Kassab, Nayla Tabbara, Joyce Khoury, Sally Azar, Nora Carmi, Qamar Badwani, Talar Marshlian, Izdihar Kassis, Firyal Eid, Gabriele Hamzé and many more!

You have always been generous in sharing your knowledge, your experience and your everyday lives with me. The way you contribute and keep things going despite the difficult role models in your societies and churches shows wisdom, dignity and strength. The world is a better place because of you!

And the world is a better place because of the Schneller schools! Because children and young adults experience there what it means to be appreciated, grow up in a non-violent environment and are given the confidence that they have a purpose in life. Many thanks to Khaled Freij in Jordan and Odette Makhoul in Lebanon for running these two institutions for the well-being of the children!

I would like to express my special thanks to Martin Keiper, who has been responsible for the graphic design of the Schneller Magazine for the last six years and has contributed greatly to the quality of the magazine with his constructive and

EMS/Heidmann



As a freelance journalist, Katja Dorothea Buck will continue to travel to the region to report on Christians in the Middle East and to test where to find the best kunafa.

critical approach. Finally, I would also like to express my gratitude to the EMS and the EVS. I was able to stay for 23 years because I was given the freedom to develop the Schneller Magazine as a publication, drawing on all my expertise on the Middle East and my professional experience as a journalist and editor. Through this work, I found my life's work.

In future, I will pursue my passion for ecumenism and for Christianity in the Middle East in a different context. I will always remember my 23 years with you as a precious and formative time. Thank you!

Katja Dorothea Buck

Laughter, tears and celebration

After 25 years of cooperation, the achievements are impressive

Celebrating in the face of destruction and fear? A joint meeting convened, even though the future of the SiMO (Study Programme in the Middle East) is uncertain due to the political situation in the region? We took the plunge at the beginning of June, convened and celebrated. And it was both a good thing and the right thing to do, because SiMO's achievements after 25 years are impressive.

Twenty-five years ago pastors, lecturers and professors campaigned to enable students from Germany to study at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut, Lebanon. Since then, more than 80 young people have studied there. However, in recent years, sending students there has become difficult. In the summer of 2020, a massive explosion rocked the city's port and also caused damage to the college. Months later, severe travel restrictions were imposed due to Covid-19. In addition, the economic situation in Lebanon became increasingly more difficult. For many, it remains a struggle for survival to this day.

After the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, SiMO students had to be recalled to safety in Germany after spending only a few weeks in Beirut. From that moment on, the returning students feared for their fellow students in the Middle East. And we, the people in charge, asked ourselves repeatedly to what extent it was still possible to study and learn in Beirut. At the latest after the so-called pager attacks in September 2024 and Israel's war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, it was no longer

possible to consider sending students there again.

However, both those responsible in Germany and in Lebanon were unanimous that the partnership, which had grown over many years, should be maintained, for example through joint consultations, which take place every three years, sometimes in Lebanon and sometimes in Germany.

It was again time for a meeting in June this year. A delegation from the NEST travelled to Erfurt where past and future cooperation was on the agenda. After 25 years, it became evident how much holistic study at the NEST has shaped the curriculum vitae of German students. The seminary in Beirut is where students and lecturers study and research together under one roof, experiencing an active spiritual life, especially in a politically and religiously highly complex context such as Lebanon.

The diversity of Christian communities, as found in Lebanon, and the question of how life and faith are shaped in a Muslim-dominated society play hardly any role in the curricula of theology and other subjects in Germany. This is what makes the knowledge and numerous encounters offered in Lebanon unique.

By the same token, the lecturers and students at the NEST repeatedly emphasised how beneficial the presence of SiMO students was and how it challenged them as Christians in the Middle East and in their theological thinking.



Listening to others and raising questions openly and without reservation. This was achieved at the SiMO consultation.

It was clear that this growing cooperation should continue. Everyone worked hard to formulate a Memorandum of Understanding—a kind of plan of hope aimed at ensuring continued cooperation in the future.

However, there was another issue that needed to be addressed in Erfurt. Namely, how can the events in Israel and Palestine, with their impact on neighbouring countries, be classified in theological terms? Students at the NEST had created posters depicting what goes through their minds when they visit destroyed villages in southern Lebanon, when missiles strike Syria, or when the journey to study at the seminary is no longer possible from the West Bank.

The fact that the German perspective differs from the Middle East viewpoint was tolerated. No one wanted to convince the other of their own viewpoint. No one wanted to attempt to harmonise or polarise. However, the emotions, fears and hopes associated with this were allowed to be expressed and were listened to by both sides. The personal admission that

the German *raison d'état* is difficult to accept in view of the destruction in Lebanon was just as much a part of the debate as the despair of having to offer comfort to Palestinian and Israeli friends.

Questions were asked openly and without reservation. One such question was, do you think that theological reflection after 7 October can still be the same as before?

Could this not be a model for ecumenical work? Start by listening to the various narratives, allow them to be heard and work with them constructively. It is to be hoped that this exchange will continue to bear fruit over the next 25 years and be supported by the ecumenical endeavour to work with and for one another for the sake of the community of faith. Thanks should be given to those who have done so up to now!

Claudia Rammelt holds a doctorate in theology and lectures and conducts research at Georg August University in Göttingen and the Ruhr University in Bochum. She is Chair of the Study Programme in the Middle East (SiMO).

Missile alerts and monastic community

A visit to Jerusalem in turbulent times

Markus Schoch's visit to Jerusalem in June this year took a dramatic turn when the so-called Twelve-Day War broke out between Israel and Iran. The Theodor Schneller School in Amman ultimately became a place of refuge.

I hadn't been to Jerusalem for a long time—it is a city that holds many memories for me. I had spent an ecumenical study year here at the Abbey of the Dormition on Mount Zion and worked as a volunteer at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City. I had travelled there with tour groups, but often I went on my own. Now I wanted to use the Whitsun holidays to visit the city again in person—rather than just follow the news from afar with a heavy heart.

Western airlines had resumed flights to Tel Aviv after temporarily suspending their services at the beginning of May. At that time, a missile from Yemen had struck near Ben Gurion Airport. There was no major damage and flights were only briefly interrupted. The people of Israel seemed to have become accustomed to this kind of attack. They trusted that the air defence system would prevent the worst—and arranged their daily lives accordingly.

I arrived in Jerusalem on 12 June and was able to stay at the Abbey of the Dormition. Upon arrival, I was shown how to install the rocket alert app on my mobile phone and where the nearest air-raid shelter was. A lot was familiar to me: walking through the alleys of the lively old town,

War created an unusual monastic community: three brothers, a few volunteers and guests at the Abbey of the Dormition in Jerusalem. Markus Schoch to the left of Abbot Nikodemus (centre).



the colourful hustle and bustle in the squares, the evening chaos of rush hour traffic.

But that night, what has since become known as the 'Twelve-Day War' started. The Israeli Air Force attacked targets in Iran, and Iran responded with massive rocket fire on Israel. The government declared a state of emergency: shops—with the exception of grocery stores and pharmacies—remained closed, and events were cancelled. The streets, which had been full of life the day before, were now quiet and deserted. The Old City was completely cordoned off and even the Western Wall was no longer accessible. Tel Aviv Airport suspended flights indefinitely, and EL AL moved its aircraft out of the country—a clear sign of the tense situation.

The attacks were more violent than usual. Even in the air-raid shelter, we



Markus Schoch

persecution on the Nile. This image became a symbol for us of a special community in uncertain times.

For us guests, the question arose of how we could leave the country. As the airport in Tel Aviv remained closed, the only reasonably safe route was via Jordan. So we became a small tour group that set off across the King Hussein Bridge into the Jordan Valley—and grateful that we found equally protective and hospitable accommodation at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. Director Khaled Freij welcomed us warmly, and we were able to stay in the guest house until we could begin our journey home from Amman Airport.

I am grateful for the protection I experienced during those days—in the community of the abbey and in the hospitality of the Schneller School. At the same time, I know that many people in this war have no place of refuge but must endure fear, loss and suffering. All the more reason for me to hope and pray that the wars in this region, with all their injustice and pain, will soon come to an end and that people will find places where they can live in peace and security

Markus Schoch is a Württemberg pastor and regional bishop in the Reutlingen prelate. He has been a member of the Executive Committee of the Schneller Foundation since 2022.

could hear the explosions clearly and feel the tremors. According to estimates, 10% to 15% of the rockets and drones were not intercepted—causing serious damage, deaths and injuries in some cases. There was no longer any question of going on excursions or travelling inside the country. A housemate remarked dryly, “It’s like Covid—only without masks, but with bunkers.”

In the abbey, we now formed a small temporary monastic community: three brothers, a few volunteers and guests. We ate together, prayed the Liturgy of the Hours and shared our experiences and impressions. The mosaic floor of the abbey church depicts an ark above the chaotic floods, with a dove and the monogram of Christ. The Hebrew word for ark, *tevah* (תבה), simply means ‘protective box’—and appears in the Bible only in reference to the box in which Moses was saved from

A vital link between here and there

Former volunteers meet in Stuttgart

At the end of October, more than 20 young adults who had worked as volunteers in Jordan or Lebanon in recent years gathered in Stuttgart at the invitation of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS). It was the second meeting of its kind since 2019.

My volunteer assignment at the Theodor Schneller School was a unique experience and a formative time for me,” says Johanna Leidel. In 2023/2024, she was a volunteer in Jordan and now serves on the Executive Committee of the Swiss Association for the Schneller Schools (SVS). “At the TSS, I supported the staff in organising leisure activities and afternoon care for the boarding home children. But I also got involved in the school. There, I helped with English lessons, choir and drama classes.”

After she returned, Johanna Leidel began studying political science and is learning Arabic—another consequence of her stay in Jordan. She learned her first words of Arabic through exchanges with the children and young adults.

“It was a case of give and take. For example, the students would point to a glass while eating and ask me what it was

called in German. That’s how I learned the Arabic word,” she explains.

At the end of October, more than 20 young adults who had worked as volunteers in Jordan and Lebanon in recent years gathered in Stuttgart. For some, their voluntary service was more than 20 years ago. For others, their impressions are still very fresh in their minds. All the participants were unanimous that their stay in Jordan or Lebanon had been a unique and formative experience. Many volunteers remain connected to the Schneller schools.

In Jordan, volunteers work at the TSS in Amman and at the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf in Salt, an educational institution for deaf and deaf-blind children. Volunteers have also worked at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) for many years. Unfortunately, in recent years, it has not been possible to send volunteers there for security reasons. Odette Haddad Makhoul, Director of the JLSS, was present at the meeting in Stuttgart. She reported on the situation at the school and the many activities that took place last year. “At the beginning of the academic year, the school remained closed. Due to the war between the Hezbollah and the Israeli army, normal activities were out of the



question. However, I am very happy that lessons were able to take place online. In November 2024, we were able to reopen the school."

Khalid Frej also attended the volunteer meeting in Stuttgart. The Director of the TSS knows many of the former volunteers. "The work of young adults from Germany is a great asset to the schools," he says. He adds that both the children and young adults benefit greatly from contact with the volunteers. "It is a two-way cultural experience and an intensive exchange. The volunteers get involved in the work of the school and help out in the boarding home and in the school. The students get to know people from a different cultural background," he explains.

Uwe Gräbe, who presented the work of the Schneller Association at the meeting in his capacity as EVS Executive Secretary also emphasised the importance of voluntary service for the Schneller Association as a whole: "The volunteers are an important link between the schools in the Middle East and the churches and congregations in Germany. Voluntary service is a living expression of the history of the schools and the bonds that continue to exist." However, there is another aspect to this. "The volunteers can give first-hand accounts. They help to ensure that the Schneller schools remain well-known and visible," says Gräbe.

Silvan Eppinger is a member of the EVS Executive Committee. In 2001/2002, he spent a year as a volunteer at the Johann Ludvig Schneller School in Lebanon.

The Ecumenical Youth Volunteer Programme of the EMS



Service at the institutions in Jordan and Lebanon is part of the Ecumenical Youth Volunteer Programme (EYVP) of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).

Since the early 1990s, young adults have been sent to projects run by EMS partner churches through this programme. They are supported and accompanied by a team of

full-time and volunteer staff at the EMS, as well as through seminars and training courses.

The EMS is recognised as a dispatching organisation for the development volunteer service 'weltwärts'—a support programme of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. For more information:

ems-online.org/mitmachen/oefp
www.weltwaerts.de/de/

The stay in Jordan or Lebanon has been a unique and formative experience for all volunteers.



General Meeting and Annual Festival of the Schneller Association 2025

At this year's General Meeting of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), the focus was on the future of Christianity in the Middle East. Overall, the Association is delighted by the substantial volume of donations.

Three young men in the furnace of blazing fire. Then a fourth figure appears from behind, lovingly and protectively placing his hand on their shoulders... It is a touching scene, depicted on an icon that Heidi Josua from the Evangelical Salam Centre brought with her to the opening service of this year's Schneller Annual Festival on 26 October. During her sermon, the relevance of this story from chapter three of the Book of Daniel became very clear for many Christians from the Middle East and North Africa. It was deeply moving.

After all, the experience of divine protection in situations where things really 'went up in flames' can also be shared by people in so many other situations. So, how much more is this true for those who sing a song about the 'heavenly church' in their devastated, burned-out church building in Egypt—as seen in a video clip that the preacher shared with the congregation?

Around fifty participants, association members and guests came to the congregation hall of the Pauluskirche (St. Paul's Church) in Stuttgart after the service to hear different perspectives on the topic of "Leave or stay. Where does the future of Christianity in the Middle East lie?" to hear news from Lebanon, Jordan and the Schneller schools, to vote on finances and to participate in the current developments of Association life.



In the afternoon, the topic of discussion was: "Leave or stay?" The future of Christianity in the Middle East was discussed by (from left) Protestant Rev. Nabil Maamarbashi from Syria, Rev. Khaled Freij, Director of the TSS in Jordan,

The directors of both Schneller schools had travelled to attend this event—Odette Haddad Makhoul from Lebanon and Khaled Freij from Jordan. Three people who literally live between cultures joined the panel discussion on the main topic: Musa Almunaizel, who is grateful to have several places he can call home in Al-Fuhais (Jordan) and Berlin; Armenian Protestant Rev. Nabil Maamarbashi, who originally comes from Syria; and Hanna Josua, also from the Evangelical Salam Centre. Everyone agreed that Christians in the Middle East would only have prospects for the future if they are granted full civil equality instead of only minority rights. Hanna Josua added that the insistence of some Christian communities on minority status has often led to dangerous alliances with dictators who often portray themselves as protectors of such minorities.

It was impressive how strongly the two Schneller directors emphasised that their work in Lebanon and Jordan was not just a job

but a calling—and a very real expression of long-standing family traditions. Odette Makhoul added that Christians do not emigrate from the countries of the Middle East because they love any country in Europe or America more than their places of origin, but rather because their prospects in their home countries are often so limited. Everyone agreed that a good education—traditionally provided by the churches in Middle East countries—is a key factor in enabling talented young people to choose between ‘leave’ and ‘stay’ in the first place. They often decide to stay after all—or to live between cultures, acting as bridge builders, so to speak.

There was a host of news to report from the two Schneller schools: from electromobility to an important award ceremony, from the inauguration of the boarding home to free training courses for girls. But a lot has also happened in the Association, as Chair Kerstin Sommer pointed out: its presence at the Church Congress, visits to schools,

Foto: SVS/Ursus Waldmaier



Rev. Uwe Gräbe, Executive Secretary of the EVS, Musa Al-Munaizel, member of the EVS Executive Committee, Odette Haddad Makhoul, Director of the JLS in Lebanon, and Rev. Hanna Josua from the Evangelical Salam Centre.

initial plans for the 20th anniversary of the Schneller Foundation in 2026/27 etc. Finally, treasurer Christian Kissling reported income and expenditure of € 1.1 million in 2024—a highly satisfactory figure! A significant proportion of this is attributable to the continuing increase in donations from many very generous individuals. Currently, this more than offsets the significant decline in donations and collections from congregations and deaneries. The valuable work of the Schneller Schools can therefore continue to be supported to the usual extent! With this in mind, the business plan was approved and the Executive Committee was unanimously discharged (with those affected abstaining).

Silvan Eppinger, former volunteer at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School and member of the EVS Executive Committee, reported on the lively meeting of numer-

ous former volunteers the day before. There were debates about what steps would be appropriate to promote recognition of the State of Palestine by the German government. It is not surprising that in some cases, opinions differed on this issue.

However, all the members joined in their immense regret that Katja Dorothea Buck would no longer be in charge of the Schneller magazine in future, and expressed their gratitude for her 23 years of service which had made the Schneller Magazine into an outstanding publication. Amidst the ups and downs of various developments, a gap is opening up here that will be difficult to fill.

Uwe Gräbe

Additional projects are possible

Stuttgart (EVS). After two rather 'lean' years, there are finally some really good signs once again in the finances of the Schneller Foundation! For the first time,

This enabled the Board of Trustees, which met in Reutlingen at the invitation of Prelate Markus Schoch, to make some bold decisions: a total of no less than



**SCHNELLER STIFTUNG –
ERZIEHUNG ZUM FRIEDEN**

the foundation's capital has grown to over three million Euro, and the revenues generated by this were also extremely good last year.

€ 41,900 will be distributed this time. Of this, € 25,000 will go to the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon to bring the two computer rooms for the students up to a decent standard.

SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools

3/4-2025

Katja Dorothea Buck



Quo vadis, Lebanon?

Hope as the path of faith


“Hope springs eternal” is a phrase we like to use when a situation seems hopeless. When all that remains is hope.

When we were in the Ukraine in autumn 2024, we spoke to young soldiers. They told us that all that remains at the front is prayer; it is the last hope that everything will turn out well in the end. Hope against all human realism.

Hope is deeply religious. It is a trust in God and a belief that God will fulfil our hopes. Hope has been taught to us Christians since the time of Abraham. “Hoping against hope, he believed...” it says in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans.

We live in a time when we hope again and again; we have no other choice. We live in a world where war has been raging in Europe for four years now, where peace seems unattainable in the Holy Land, where the military has been waging war against the population in Myanmar for the past five years. The list of conflict zones around the world could go on and on.

But we also live in a time when we are called upon to take a firm stand. For the wars in the Holy Land, Myanmar and Ukraine show what is at stake: our freedom. Freedom means taking responsibility. Paul says that Christ has called us to freedom. It means that we are called upon to let the Holy Spirit guide our actions and deeds and emphasise the spiritual dimension of our work explicitly.



A sign of hope in dark times: candles burning in the small St. George's Chapel in the Old City of Damascus.

Our partners report on hopeless situations, on dark nights, and how they patiently endure suffering and yet continue to hope and act. They cherish the hope that things will turn out well. They also draw the strength for this hope from their faith. Then faith becomes a means of healing. In their commitment, they intercede for God on behalf of humanity. Because the point is to fight for the uncon-

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’.

Romans 4:18 (NIV)



Katja Dorothea Buck

ditional dignity of every human being in the name of God in such a bleak situation. Hope leads to action. Christianity becomes a source of hope, and hope becomes the path of faith.

“The world today is in great need of this Christian virtue! The world needs hope,” said Pope Francis on 8 May 2024, and continued, “just as it needs patience, a virtue that walks in close contact with hope. Patient men are weavers of goodness. They stubbornly desire peace, and even if some of them are hasty and would like everything, and straight away, patience is capable of waiting. Even when around us many have succumbed to disillusionment, those who are inspired by hope and are patient are able to get through the darkest of nights. Hope and patience go together.”

However, it is precisely this patience that is strained when one longs for peace in crisis-ridden countries. When one has to flee because the military is burning

down villages in Myanmar, attacking civilian targets in Ukraine, or when Christians and Muslims are being driven from their land by radical settlers in the Holy Land and so many people are dying in the Gaza Strip.

We must call on the warring parties to embark on paths of hope, to find ways of dialogue, to talk to each other in order to find a way out of the spiral of violence, and find a path to peace. Dialogue is the mission of the Church, because it is in the nature of the Church to lead people to unity and love (cf. *Nostra aetate* 1).

Peace is a state of mind. The 1954 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Fr. Dominique Pire OP, said, “Dialogue means looking beyond the limits of one’s own convictions and, for the duration of the dialogue, sharing the heart and mind of the other, without giving up any part of oneself, in order to understand, evaluate and appreciate what is truly good and useful in the thoughts, feelings and actions of the other. One must truly put oneself in the other person’s shoes. This requires putting oneself, who we are and what we think, in a kind of parentheses in order to appreciate the other person positively without necessarily sharing their point of view. Therein lies a profound self-sacrifice.”

This is the spirit with which we as Christians are called upon to work for peace and dialogue based on hope. Today more than ever.

Nadim K. Amman has been working in the Diocesan Office for Global Church and Dialogue, Cologne since 2003 and has been its director since September 2020.

Response to the yearning for truth and transformation

A new Middle East needs well-trained theologians

It is six years ago, the 17th October 2019, that a “Revolution” occurred in Lebanon, or what many now call the “Change Uprising”. The event remains a defining moment in Lebanon’s modern history—a collective cry for justice, dignity, and reform. Theology must give a response to this.

Five years have passed since I stepped down from my role as Chief Academic Officer of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, concluding nineteen years of service. The years that followed were a time of reflection, research, and renewed engagement with the realities shaping Lebanon and the region.

Through the research initiative Action Research Associates, which I co-founded, I became involved in two parallel projects. The first, *Dealing with the Past*, developed educational modules on the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) using a multiple-narrative approach—creating space for dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation. The second, the Agora Initiative, worked to foster collaboration among political and social change activists who emerged from the 17th October movement. Together with two colleagues, we sought to address both Lebanon’s unresolved past and its uncertain future, guided by the vision of a Just Civil State.

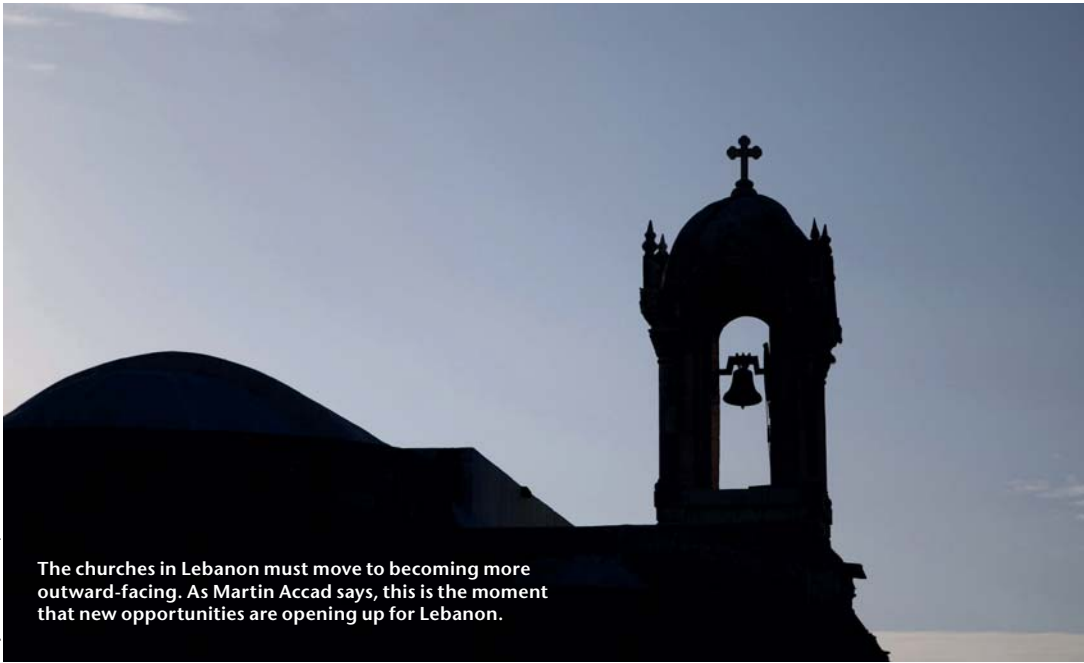
In September 2024, I was called to serve as the 11th President of the Near East School of Theology (NEST). Personally, this felt like a divine invitation to bring

together two worlds that have shaped my life—the world of theological education and the world of public transformation. It is here that I see a new horizon for seminaries in our region.

The Middle East today stands once more at a crossroads. Lebanon’s multiple crises have left deep scars, yet they have also opened a window for reform. The election of President Joseph Aoun and the appointment of Prime Minister Nawaf Salam in 2024 offered a moment of hope—two leaders of rare moral integrity entrusted with the chance to chart a new course. It is a moment we must not squander.

Amid regional upheavals and waves of displacement, our churches have also been transformed. Many have become more outward-looking, partnering across denominational and interfaith lines, responding to human need, and embodying hospitality and peace. Yet this moment calls for even more. The church must move from being an inward-looking community of worship to becoming an outward-facing community of peace and well-being. And for that transition, seminaries hold a critical role.

The Near East School of Theology, with nearly two centuries of Protestant theological education behind it, now faces its own pivotal moment. Its story began in the 1830s with two training programs—one in Beirut among Arabs and another in south-eastern Turkey for Armenians and



The churches in Lebanon must move to becoming more outward-facing. As Martin Accad says, this is the moment that new opportunities are opening up for Lebanon.

Syriacs. These merged in 1932 to form NEST, which has since equipped leaders across Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and beyond.

But the challenges of our time require more than preparing clergy for ordination. The region now needs church leaders with a vision for holistic transformation—leaders who can engage theology with economics, environment, conflict, and culture. That is why NEST has embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process, involving numerous stakeholders and focus groups besides the faculty team. The NEST should become not only a place of academic formation but also a center for research and public theology.

Our graduates will be equipped with biblical and theological frameworks to analyze and respond to society's most

urgent challenges—environmental degradation, multi-generational poverty, systemic violence, and social fragmentation. We aim to nurture leaders who embody peace-building, psychosocial well-being, and a mindset of ecumenical and interfaith cooperation—leaders who can resist the culture of self-protection and sectarian fear that has long paralyzed our societies.

Only with such formation can the Church and the seminary in the Near East truly rise to meet this moment in history, reclaiming their prophetic calling and continuing the vision of their founders: to be instruments of renewal, justice, and hope in a region yearning for both truth and transformation.

Dr Martin Accad is President of the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut.

The storms are heavy, but the sails are set

About a self-generating hope

Lebanese people throughout generations have become used to looking at Lebanon with a pain in their hearts. However, those painful looks have always been coupled with a hopeful outlook. This, perhaps, is what gives the Lebanese people, whether those in or outside Lebanon, the unique character of resilience and attachment to one's country. However, those painful looks have always been coupled with a hopeful outlook.

While logic dictates observing something scientifically and retrieving data that can benefit analysis and predictions, hope has proven not to work that way. Hope is an outlook into the unknown and the invisible, with the yearning and expectation of a bright outcome. Such hope, of course, necessitates an attachment and a love beyond the economical one where feelings are based on benefits received.

For many decades, people have seen the troubles which Lebanon faced. Recognizing the potential of the country despite those obstacles, feelings of disappointment would naturally convert into despair. This would be visible in the choices of either leaving the country, or staying in it indifferently.

However, a certain feeling of attachment, as I see it, has been maturing over the past decades as people in the diaspora share the difficulty of leaving home. This attachment, coupled with an increase of a



sense of responsibility in an atmosphere of a decent quality of education provided by the private sector and of a refusal to relive history, has created a platform of hope for the Lebanese. And, so, now, instead of turning disappointment into despair, it is leading to more stubbornness in taking a hold of Lebanon's potential, with an authentic desire to see a brighter future.

When such a platform for hope starts to be established, resilience and action-taking start to increase from generation to generation. One example of this is the increased attachment to the Arabic language, especially the Lebanese dialect. People are resorting to using it, teaching it, and expressing their thoughts with it



The love for the country's unique history, the beauty of its nature and the coexistence of its people form the foundation of the hope that things will again get better.

and projects that work on reducing harmful circumstances. Lebanese people in the diaspora are working on establishing connections and planting investments. Hope results in action in a self-generating manner.

The above examples may seem basic to some, but those actions based on hope, in turn, create more hope. This updated hope will, in turn, create more actions, and this will be a self-generating cycle that will set the Lebanese people on the side of rescuing their country. Moreover, hope and the sense of belonging are contagious. Hope not only increases in the vertical direction. It also broadens horizontally.

Nevertheless, we should not be naive concerning many circumstances that are out of hand. However, this is true for every country. What is important is that, amid the circumstances that are imposed, we realize a certain potential and move forward with it with all our power. A bad situation that is out of control is different from a bad or worsening situation resulting from indifference.

"Quo Vadis, Lebanon?" is the question of the season. Lebanon, I would think, would answer, "That's not in my control, but I do know that I can be impacted by where my people want me to go." The storms are heavy, but the sails are set.

George Al-Sahili is studying theology at the Near East School of Theology (NEST).

amid general waves of using English as an international language.

This is also true with regard to culture and art. Many young people are determined to bring back the cultural heritage of Lebanon. Many youth are willing to be involved politically and back parties that work on ensuring human rights, fighting corruption, and getting rid of the sectarian system that has been drowning Lebanon in the ocean of lethal internal conflicts.

Lebanese people are now more aware of the power of their vote. They are being more responsible in terms of voting the politicians who will represent them. Many young adults are volunteering in NGOs

“As a Christian, I have the duty to serve”

Interview with Minister Kamal Shehadi about the future of Lebanon

Dr Kamal Shehadi has been Lebanon's Minister of the Displaced and Minister of State for Technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) since February. He has a background in Protestant youth work.



Selfie with minister: Uwe Gräbe and Kamal Shehadi at a meeting in Beirut.

experiences that I was able to pass on: my own four children later also got involved in youth work at our church.

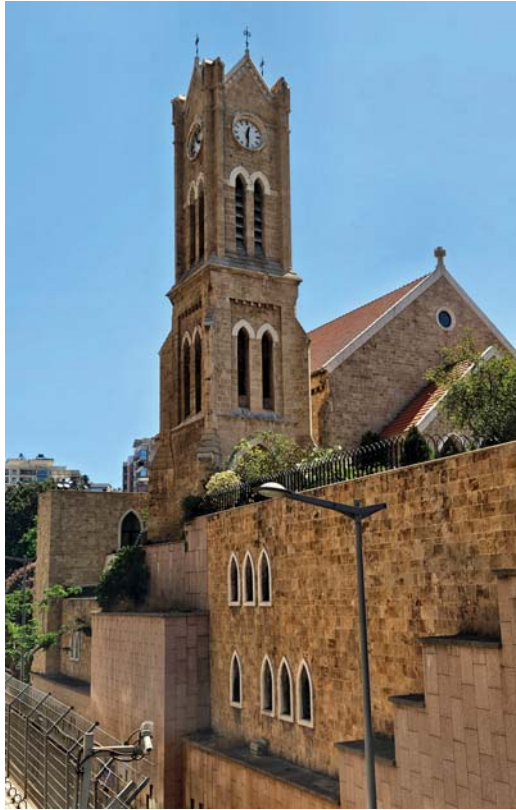
But Shehadi then studied abroad, returning with excellent degrees from the UK and the US. He eventually pursued a career as a senior executive at telecommunications and technology companies in the Gulf. What makes someone like him give up what he has achieved to take on political responsibility in Lebanon in the midst of the deepest crisis? Of course, he says, he left behind a comfortable life: privacy, a cozy home... He wouldn't have done it without the support of his family. But two reasons in particular led him to take this step:

The computer camera's view of the minister's office shows an almost puritanically sober scene: a whitewashed wall, a portrait of Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, the Lebanese flag. Behind the tidy desk sits Dr Kamal Shehadi in a plain white shirt. Now I want to know: What are his roots?

Shehadi: I grew up in the Protestant community of Beirut. My parents were already members of the congregation; I was active in youth work. The current Senior Pastor, Dr. Habib Badr, led my youth group, and Dr. George Sabra, who later became president of the Near East School of Theology (NEST), was also involved. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, we regularly went to summer camps at the Schneller School. There were Bible studies, leisure activities, and practical work. For example, we renovated one or two classrooms. These were great, formative

Shehadi: First, I am convinced that Christian faith always leads to action. As a Christian I have the duty to serve. And second, with the new government, the new prime minister, and the president, who have impeccable track records, we have the opportunity for the first time to actually build a better republic and open up new prospects for the future for our children.

However, displaced persons and high technology are two very different portfolios that hardly fit together. The former does not, of course, refer to Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but rather to those Lebanese who had to leave the country during the civil war (1975-1990) and many of whom would still like to return. The portfolio for the displaced is thus a ministry that has to come to terms with the past in order to then be wound



The National Evangelical Church in Beirut: home church of Kamal Shehadi.

Katja Dorothea Buck

as there was in South Africa. Instead, the parties decided to declare a general amnesty and simply turn a new page in history—in other words, to live with the fact that there are different versions of the truth. At the local level, however, my ministry has already been able to contribute a great deal to reconciliation in previous years, for example by returning houses in villages to their original inhabitants and building new houses for the people who had been illegally quartered there. Ultimately, it is a matter of breaking an endless cycle of revenge.

And what about the future? How will Lebanon emerge from its deep economic crisis? And what role will high technology play in this? It is clear that this is a matter close to the minister's heart:

Shehadi: Artificial intelligence (AI) will play a paramount role in Lebanon's reconstruction. We will therefore create the conditions for Lebanese expatriates to invest in the future sectors of our country. In this context, appropriate regulation is necessary to ensure the protection of personal data and a high level of cybersecurity. The given conditions are not bad at all in our country. In our schools and universities, there are many amazing talents. Just last week, I had the privilege of honoring some young people who came second and third out of tens of thousands of students in a cloud computing competition in Shanghai. Lebanese students coming second and third in a major international competition. That's fantastic!

Of course we need support for our education system, for the Lebanese economy, moral support and many prayers. We are not an island. We are not isolated. We are connected to the world—and will be even more closely connected: through fiber networks

up itself, so that the country can move on. The technology ministry, on the other hand, is entirely future-oriented.

But how can the past be dealt with when numerous traumas of the civil war have never been addressed?

Shehadi: The ugliest chapter of the civil war was when neighbors turned against neighbors and there were outright massacres. At the national level, we have never dealt with this in an organized manner. There has been no truth and reconciliation commission here

as well as human and economic networks. You can be anywhere on this planet and still deliver valuable work. We want to build large data centers here in Lebanon, we want to network as part of an international community of values.

What do you expect from churches around the world ?

Shehadi: Our brothers and sisters worldwide should develop a better understanding of

Christians in the Middle East, especially in the Levant. We are committed to ensuring that every community has a place here and can feel at home here. To achieve this, we need support for our education system, moral support, and lots of prayers. All communities in this region long for peace and the opportunity to develop. You should support this coexistence!

*The interview was conducted by
Uwe Gräbe.*



Jack Harbich/unsplash

Sunset over Batroun, Lebanon

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*May the God of hope fill you with all joy
and peace as you trust in him, so that you may over-
flow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 15:13



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