

# SCHNELLER

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## Church and state on the Nile

Being a Christian in modern-day Egypt

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Cover: Colleagues at a school in Beni Sueif (Egypt). Two of them are Christian, one is Muslim.

Back cover: Entrance gate to the El-Muallaqa Church in the old part of Cairo.

Its origins date back to the 3rd century. The calligraphy in the central medallion means: God is Love.  
(Photos: Katja Buck)

**Dear Reader,**

with a population of over 100 million people, Egypt is the largest country in the Middle East. It is also number one when it comes to Christian presence. Admittedly, there are no exact figures. But even if one accepts the state authorities' probably understated figure of five per cent, there are more than five million Christians living in the country. The churches estimate this figure to be more than 15 million.

Most Christians on the Nile today say that they have never been as well off as they are now. President Abd el-Fattah as-Sisi is considered a great friend of Christians. He has churches built at state expense and has legalised churches that were once built without a permit. He declares national mourning after attacks on Copts and has the perpetrators brought to justice. All of this is positive, but it is difficult to reconcile it with what as-Sisi is best known for in this country: as an autocratic ruler who shuts down critics and leaves little room for the opposition.

After Syria (3/2018), Lebanon (4/2020), Armenia (1/2021), Jordan (2/2021) and Israel/Palestine (4/2021), we dedicate this issue to Christians in Egypt and explore the question of what Christian life is like on the Nile today. What effects does the government's pro-Christian policy have on the churches, on the coexistence of Christians and Muslims, and what risks still exist today? This is not to ignore the fact that the human rights situation in Egypt remains somewhat of a problem. However, the focus on Christians gives us the opportunity to understand a facet that is otherwise easily overlooked.

As always, you will also find a lot of good news from the Schneller schools in this issue, such as the support programme for children with learning difficulties at the Theodor Schneller School or the opening of the new carpentry workshop at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School. We also accompany you to an exciting consultation in Beirut and report on the controversial debate about a research paper on Israel and Palestine.

We wish you a stimulating read and hope that you will find interesting aspects in the articles.

Many greetings on behalf of the editorial team.

Best



Katja Dorothea Buck





The Emmaus icon was written by the Jerusalem Benedictine nun Marie-Paul (b. 1930) for the Church of St Adalbert in Aachen.

## Their eyes were opened

**T**he journey of the pair of disciples walking to the village of Emmaus holds the perfect tension between clear revelation of God’s person, and deep mystery of God’s presence. It is a story that calls us to gratefully receive God’s revelation, while humbly confessing God’s uncontainability, for God’s thoughts and ways are not ours.

In the disciples’ distress and confusion, Jesus mysteriously appeared and walked with them. Jesus, who knows that often our grief and suffering drain our strength, does not wait for us to figure out how to come to him, instead he comes and walks the rest of the journey with us, even when we do not recognize his companionship. Jesus asked the two disciples a question to encourage them to tell their story, because Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor, who knows that healing occurs in the tell-

ing of our stories and the naming of our pains. Still, Jesus’ question shocked them and they wondered out loud if Jesus was the only one in Jerusalem who did not know what was happening. Jesus was the only one in Jerusalem, and on earth, who knew exactly what was happening.

So, the pair of disciples shared with their companion about who Jesus was, what he did, and what was done to him; finally stating what was really upsetting them: “But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

I imagine that if the resurrection had not happened, and if all of Jesus’ disciples had to write their autobiographies, they would have probably chosen to give them this title: ‘BUT WE HAD HOPED’. I also imagine that some of us are familiar with this disappointing feeling. There were

times when our hopes in life, in others, and even in ourselves failed us.

There were times when we expected God to act like the God that we had hoped for. Traditionally the church has referred to the Saturday after Good Friday as 'Holy Saturday.' However, they could only come up with such a name after the church knew the certainty of Sunday's resurrection. But, for anyone who does not know this certainty, the reality of life experiences imposes the more accurate name of "Disappointing Saturday".

Finally, the Emmaus disciples conclude their story by sharing their amazement with Jesus about how the women came and told them that they had seen a vision of angels, who said He was alive. As Jesus continues with the pair of disciples on their journey, like a patient teacher, he explains to them the scriptures beginning with Moses and all the prophets, and by so doing he reframed their personal stories into a much larger divine narrative that gave meaning to their suffering.

Yet, his mysterious ways surface again when, as they were approaching the village of Emmaus, Jesus pretended as if he was going further. Maybe he wanted to test their longing for his companionship and desire for his teaching. Jesus entered their home, and when he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave to them, finally and mysteriously "their eyes were opened". And in the same mysterious way that he appeared on the road, he also disappeared from their home.

In Genesis 3:7, there was another pair whose "eyes were also opened," but to their nakedness and shame – a recognition that led them to hide from God, and

that turned them against each other refusing to take responsibility for their own actions.

But after Easter, the opened eyes recognized Jesus, and the two disciples returned immediately to Jerusalem to share the good news with them. The two downcast disciples who walked 11 km from Jerusalem to Emmaus are not the same two flaming disciples who walked the same 11 km back to Jerusalem. The Risen Jesus had transformed them, offering them an alternative vision of reality and another mission to join.

The Risen Jesus has transformed us also. Every time we remember Jesus' death and resurrection in the breaking of the bread, the risen Christ reframes our story as Middle East Christians, giving meaning and purpose to our grief and suffering.

And praise be to God, who retitles our autobiographies to become: 'HE IS RISEN', and commissions us to bear witness to the truth that he is making all things new.

*Anne Zaki is a Protestant theologian in Egypt and teaches at the ETSC Theological Seminary in Cairo.*

## Attacks, kidnappings, defamations

Why all is far from well for the Copts in Egypt

**In terms of religious freedom, there have been some improvements in Egypt in recent years. But this is still not enough to ensure that Christians are no longer discriminated against and attacked because of their religion. Laws need to be formulated more clearly. And a culture of tolerance is needed.**

**B**efore the Easter celebrations of the eastern churches, Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, sent several messages to state institutions in Egypt following multiple incidents targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt during Ramadan.

The second week of last April was difficult for the Copts, and it can be described as a week of pain (which means the Holy Week in Coptic culture). A Coptic Christian clergyman was murdered in cold blood in Alexandria governorate on 7 April while walking in the street with youth from his church. A 60-year-old man stabbed the priest Arsenios Wadid.

This crime was followed by two other incidents involving the fact that, from a Muslim perspective, nothing should be eaten before sunset in the month of Ramadan. A famous restaurant in Cairo refused to allow a Christian woman to eat in the dining room before the Muslim fast breaking. And an influential newspaper published the fatwa of a religious extremist imam from Syria on selling food during Ramadan to “infidels”. The fatwa describes non-Muslims as infidels to whom food may not be sold during the daytime

during the Muslim month of fasting. The imam’s reasoning was that they too must abide by the rules of the Sharia.

In another incident, a young Christian woman disappeared in Beni-Suef governorate, about a hundred kilometres south of Cairo. Her family claimed she had been kidnapped and filed a request with the authorities to intervene to free her. Shortly afterwards, a video emerged in which Mariam Waheeb announced her conversion to Islam. She appeared very sad and confused. The family was convinced that she was forced to make the video. After the responsible authorities intervened, the woman returned to her family.

Pope Tawadros’ messages contained a veiled criticism of the state’s handling of these issues. It was the first time the Pope had spoken out in this way. He called for the authorities to carefully investigate reports on social media about the disappearance and abduction of Coptic Christians. He added: “It is inappropriate to publish articles or broadcast videos that harm or offend any religious group in Egypt.” This, he said, jeopardises the security and stability of the country and distorts the image of Egypt.

If we look at the current state of religious freedom in Egypt, a relative and selective improvement can be seen in some areas, especially after the President of the Republic, Abd el-Fattah as-Sisi, repeatedly spoke about freedom of belief also applying to those who do not believe in one of the three monotheistic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism). On the other





Painted by an unknown hand on a tin box on a wall in the alleys of Old Cairo: a crescent moon and a cross symbolising the understanding between Christians and Muslims. It will take more than a new coat of paint to turn this into reality.

hand, there are still some very bad cases that require quick and tough action to address the roots of discrimination based on religious identities.

Among the most important points that have improved is that there is less hate speech and calls for violence from offi-

cial bodies and religious institutions. In general, they now speak – even if only in theory – in favour of civil rights and equality for all Egyptians. The numerical representation of Christians in parliaments has also increased after the introduction of a quota. And the situation regarding the building of churches has

improved slightly, since the President of the Republic ordered that a church must be built in every new neighbourhood. But the old villages still suffer from difficulties in building churches. For example, nine Copts are currently imprisoned for organising a protest demanding the rebuilding of their destroyed church.

However, these improvements have not changed the legislative structures. For example, the freedom to change religion is only allowed in one direction, from any faith to Islam, while Muslims are not allowed to leave Islam. This is a major reason for the phenomenon of disappearance or kidnapping of Christian girls.

Defamation lawsuits are another aspect of discrimination against religious minorities. Although laws exist against religious defamation, they are not defined clearly enough and can easily be manipulated or even misapplied. In 2021, the courts considered nine cases of defamation. In

There are no exact figures on religious communities in Egypt. Between 5% and 15% of the 105 million Egyptians are said to be Christians. That would mean somewhere between 5 and 15 million. 90% of Egyptian Christians are Coptic Orthodox.

Among the ten remaining percent, Presbyterians form the largest group with two-thirds, followed by Coptic Catholics with just under one-third. There are also numerous other churches, including the Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches. The smallest denominational group is the Anglicans, with members numbering four digits.

one case an actress was acquitted, in seven others there was a conviction. And one case was returned to the State Prosecutors for further investigation.

Moreover, the state still controls the legal recognition of religious sects, and the lack of recognition results in the civil exclusion of their followers, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Bahai, Shiites and atheists – they are unable to produce official papers legitimising them as a religious community by the state. They cannot practise their religious rites in public, document marriage contracts or settle family law disputes.

A major step towards religious freedom would be for the state to ensure that every citizen has the right to exercise his or her right to freedom of religion or belief, including expressing his or her faith, changing faith and freely practising his or her religious rites without coercion or discrimination.

At the same time, much remains to be done to contain extremist ideologies so that a culture of religious pluralism and respect for the rights of others can grow. This is what Pope Tawadros called a renewal of minds and ideas through education and proper concepts, through the cultural and social development of people and the strengthening of coexistence and true citizenship.

*Ishak Ibrahim is a journalist in Cairo and works for the Egyptian NGO Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.*



# The risk of the present security

The “al-Sisi policy” towards the Christian community in Egypt

**A debate about Egypt’s soul has been raging for at least 100 years. This is the struggle between traditionalist Muslims – including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi movement and large parts of al-Azhar University – and opponents to Islamic religious hegemony with leading Egyptian scholars who believe that tolerance for peoples of different convictions is linked to education.**

**A**bd el-Fattah as-Sisi, Egypt’s president since 2014, has inherited this debate. One of his predecessors, President Gamal Abd el-Nasser (1952-1970) was a nationalist who believed in modernization without the involvement of religious movements. He initially cooperated with the Muslim Brotherhood but later severely persecuted them. President Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981) used Islamists in his struggle against the then powerful socialist elite. Islamists advocated for more influence of the Shari’a in Egypt’s constitution and opposed, among other things, Coptic church building.

The Copts had in Pope Shenouda (1971-2012) a fierce leader who was not afraid to oppose government decisions that he believed restricted the freedom of Christians in Egypt, but this also gave rise to tensions between Pope Shenouda and Sadat, Islamists and Christians that culminated in the arrest of 1,536 people, among them 120 Copts, including Pope Shenouda, 8 bishops and 24 priests. Not long after, on October 6, 1981, Sadat was murdered by an Islamist. President Hosni Mubarak thus inherited a very volatile climate in which

he was navigating between Islamists and their opponents, at times clashing with Pope Shenouda. Abd el-Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak were not explicitly against the Copts. They saw them more as an insignificant party in the political game of their time. Therefore, they did not grant them all their demands. President as-Sisi, on the other hand, is more receptive to the wishes of the Coptic leadership.

There is a wide divergence in the figures that are supposed to show the actual percentage of Christians in the Egyptian population, varying from 5 to 15%, depending on the source. However, it is an indisputable fact that their economic influence goes far beyond these percentages.

Since the revolution of 1952, Egypt’s autocratic leaders have been in the habit of negotiating with the religious communities about their hierarchical structures. And since Coptic Orthodox Christians make up about 90% of all Christians in Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros (since 2012) is the church leader with the most political influence.

The last months of his predecessor Pope Shenouda were affected by the 2011 revolution. Growing discrepancies between rich and poor, extreme poverty and police atrocities contributed to the 25 January 2011 revolution that brought Islamists to power in the presidency of Muhammad Mursi (2012-2013). Mursi gave in to Islamists pressures to further Islamize society which led to months of demonstrations of non-Islamist Muslims and Coptic Christians which ultimately made Minister of



Defense Abd el-Fattah as-Sisi remove president Mursi from power in a television speech. He was flanked by Pope Tawadros, who had been enthroned shortly before, and Ahmed at-Tayyeb, since 2010 Sheikh of al-Azhar, the supreme teaching institution of Sunni Islam in the world. The Pope was strongly criticized by Islamists for joining as-Sisi on TV but could he have acted differently?

A few weeks after Mursi's disposal, over 60 churches, mostly in Upper Egypt, were destroyed. As-Sisi instructed the Egyptian army to help rebuild them. President

as-Sisi is the first Egyptian president who attended in 2015 a Coptic Christmas service. And this he has repeated every year since. He also provided a permit for building a huge new Cathedral in the new administrative capital.

President as-Sisi is well aware that Islamists, and in particular the Muslim-Brotherhood, are able to form a threat against his regime. In the first years after as-Sisi became president, Islamists attacked the Egyptian police, army, judiciary and Copts. As-Sisi ended this with a heavy-handed policy but also realized



**The Azhar is the leading teaching institution in Sunni Islam. It therefore plays a key role if religious discourse in Egypt is to become more tolerant.**

also a very risky position they are taking in. Christian leaders in Iraq and Syria were closely allied with presidents Saddam Hussein and al-Assad which turned them into a target for Islamists when they vied for power. This is also a risk for the church in Egypt. As long as Egypt is ruled by as-Sisi or someone sharing his views they will be safe but if Egypt would face an Islamist revolution as in Syria, Christians will be their first targets.

At this moment Egypt does not fear a new revolution. Egyptian TV and media are broadcasting the Islamist violence and manipulations since the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Sentiments are strongly pro as-Sisi but could renewed unrest take place with a large part of population living in dire poverty? The government is well aware that not only the religious discourse but also the economic woes of millions of Egyptians need to be addressed. Reducing tourism revenues and increasing wheat prices resulting from the Russian-Ukrainian war do not make it easy for the government to address the many concerns the country is facing.

that he needed to address Islamic education. Previous presidents either did not dare to address such a sensitive subject in a deeply religious country as Egypt is or did not want to do so. In a landmark speech on July 13, 2015, President as-Sisi linked the need to renew the religious discourse with counter-terrorism. This was, most notably, not appreciated by most leaders in the Azhar.

Christian religious leaders of all denominations are acutely aware that it is in the interest of their communities to be on good terms with the president. It is

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Hosam El-Syad/CC BY-SA 3.0

# Prayers for a pious president

How life has changed for Christians under President as-Sisi

**If anyone asks Christians in Egypt about President Abd el-Fattah as-Sisi, they usually hear only good things said about him. Since as-Sisi was elected President in 2014, the situation of Christians has been improving each year and relations between Copts, Catholics and Protestants have also become more relaxed.**

President as-Sisi is regarded as a pious and moderate Muslim. He has undertaken great renovation and development in Egypt since his inauguration. The country has changed radically from a Third World country to a modern rapidly developing 21<sup>st</sup>-century nation. One of his preoccupations has been trying to effectively minister to people with special needs, especially children. He has been doing this for the last four years and at a recent annual conference for children with special needs they were each invited to ask the president a question. In the response to a question about who is his model in life, he said that he didn't have a single model but that his immediate family members were his models. From his mother he learned how to accept people from all backgrounds; from his uncle he learned generosity and compassion for the needy; and from his father he learned diligence in work.

Since his appointment he has helped register hundreds of Churches that had not been able to operate officially. He has also been involved in the construction of the largest cathedral in Africa (seating 8,000) for the Coptic Orthodox Church in the new administrative capital of New Cai-

ro. Each year he has attended the Christmas mass at the Coptic Cathedral and has addressed the nation from there. He is the first president since the 1952 revolution to have ever attended a Church service and has said how much he appreciates being in "this house of God". (*Editor's note: By using this formulation, as-Sisi deliberately sets himself apart from an Islamist debate that refers to Christians as "infidels".*)

As-Sisi has tried hard to make sure that school curriculums do not reflect radical Muslim teaching. Some critics have accused him of being biased towards Christians and caring for them for political reasons. His response to this quite strongly stated that his concern for Christians does not come from a political perspective but reflects what he believes is the true character of Islam. He believes that Islam has been misrepresented in the West and he wants to present the forgiving, accepting and caring side of his religion.

When asked whether he enjoyed being President, he said that this was the wrong question. He believes God has appointed him to this position and one of his great fears is that he may not please God fully in what he is doing. He said that every night he goes to bed praying that he did right that day. This does not mean that all Christians in Egypt are being treated fairly or that life is easy for all. But it does mean that we have a President who, for the first time in Egyptian history, has made it a point to make life better and easier for Christians and to include them as co-citizens with Muslims in this great nation. Over 100 million people live in



One of the first state guests at the new cathedral in New Cairo was Mike Pompeo, the then US Secretary of State.

Egypt and the majority of them are Muslim. The percentage of Christians is estimated at between 10 and 15%. Although Christians are largely not directly persecuted in Egypt, but they have long faced discrimination, especially when it comes to employment opportunities in government, university professorships and promotions in the army. Most Christians in Egypt are grateful for their President and pray for God to protect him and to allow him to accomplish the many dreams he has for Egypt.

Whether this wonderful attitude towards Christians has been the major reason for better relations between Copts, Catholics and Evangelicals in Egypt is hard to say. I think one of the major reasons for this is that Christian social media and Christian TV have created a more “generic” understanding of the Christian faith that is less dependent on denominational distinctions.

Christian Youth at youth meetings in all Churches sing many of the same worship songs. Christians of all persuasions listen to the same preachers on TV or YouTube, regardless of their Church affiliation. The increased visibility and accessibility of Bibles and Bible-related books have also given a sense of unity among Christians. While there are still many challenges, we are in a new “era” for Christians in Egypt and pray this will continue.

*Ramez Atallah is General Director of the Bible Society of Egypt.*



## A thaw in ecumenism

The Coptic Orthodox Church opens up to other denominations

For a long time, the ecumenical situation on the Nile looked very bleak. But in the last ten years, there have been signs that the freeze between confessions is thawing. This has less to do with President as-Sisi's pro-Christian policies than with the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II.

Visit to a family in a small village in Upper Egypt in the mid-1990s: At some point in the morning, the Coptic priest knocks and inquires – as he regularly does with all those who are entrusted to his care – about the family's well-being. As a farewell, everyone is to receive the blessing. The mother quickly makes a sign for me to also stand in the line of family members. With his hand cross, the priest makes a sign of the cross first over the parents, then over the grandmother and finally over each of the four children and says a blessing. When he comes to me, he pauses and asks: "Where are you from?" From Germany. "Catholic or Protestant?" When he hears that I am Protestant, he just clicks his tongue in disgust, makes a derogatory hand gesture and leaves me standing there without a blessing. The Coptic village priest's disregard was impressive, but not unusual at the time.

Until a few years ago, the ecumenical situation in Egypt was not good. There were historical and dogmatic reasons for this. In the mid-19th century, Protestant missionaries from America, Scotland and Holland had been successful among the native Copts with their interpretation of the Bible. This was the start of the Cop-



Pope Tawadros chatting amiably with two Lutheran bishops. A few years ago, this photo would have been a rarity. Left: Ibrahim Azar, Bishop of Jerusalem, next to him his prede-

dic Evangelical or Presbyterian Church of Egypt. The Coptic Catholic Church had come into being a good hundred years earlier. Coptic Orthodox Christians had sought union with Rome. For the mother church, they were renegades and the Protestants were "sheep stealers". As late as 2009, Bishop Bischoy, the right-hand man of Pope Shenuda III, announced that Protestant and Catholic Christians would not enter paradise.

But in 2013, less than four years later, I was to experience at first hand that the wind in Egypt had shifted strongly in the direction of ecumenism. During a visit to the Wednesday addresses of the new Coptic Pope Tawadros II in St Mark's Ca-



MECC

cessor, Munib Yunan at the plenary meeting of the Middle Eastern Council of Churches, held for the first time ever in Egypt in May this year.

thedral in Cairo, the general secretary of the newly founded National Council of Churches grabbed me by the sleeve and pulled me through the crowds to the very front of the pews reserved for bishops and monks. There he placed me in the middle of them – and no one was surprised. That is where I sat, directly in front of the iconostasis, in the immediate vicinity of the Pope, and was amazed.

A few weeks earlier, on 18 February 2013, the Coptic Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic, Roman Orthodox and Anglican churches had founded the Egyptian Council of Churches. The idea is said to go back to Pope Shenuda III, who died in March 2012. However, the foundation was main-

ly driven by his successor Pope Tawadros II. He had insisted that all five denominations should have equal voting rights and that the leadership should be filled by a different church every two years.

Tawadros showed that he is a convinced ecumenist right from his first trip abroad, which took him to Rome to meet Pope Francis in May 2013, and in 2017, the two even signed a declaration that they recognise each other's baptism. "Tawadros II is very open, ready for dialogue and he has respect for other denominations," says Kamil Samaan, Coptic Catholic priest and professor of the Old Testament, attesting to the Coptic pope's wise personnel policy.

Some of the old bishops who had been appointed by Shenuda still criticise the dialogue efforts. The younger generation, however, is changing the picture significantly. The number of tolerant bishops is growing, says Samaan, "because he chooses tolerant people and ordains them as bishops". The National Council of Churches is now a forum that brings together Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants and Orthodox. There are commissions that work together in many different areas. In society, too, one notices that people are slowly becoming more tolerant. "We are now on the right path in Egypt. But we also need encouragement and support from our brothers in the West, be it political, moral and even spiritual."

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

# Protection of minorities and the construction of a monument

## The Copts under President as-Sisi

**Coptic monasteries have no worries about finding novices, and the president is having the world's largest Coptic cathedral built at the state's expense. A lot has changed for the churches in Egypt in recent years.**

If you want to experience an early mass in a Coptic monastery, you'll have to get up early. Very early. My cameraman and I did not find it overly difficult, as we had hardly slept anyway on the palm straw that was supposed to make the hard beds a little more bearable. At three o'clock in the morning, Brother Girgis had crashed into our monastic guest room, saying: "Come on, get up. It's almost time to go." Dress. Get the camera ready. We'll wash later.

Shortly before sunrise, we set off. A service with lots of singing – a bit monotonous to our ears, but nevertheless moving and solemn – some monks set the rhythm with cymbals. Incense lies heavy in the air; the many candles bathe the interior of the thousand-year-old church in a mysterious light. In the flickering light, you can just about make out the frescoes on the vaulted ceiling, slowly fading with age. The monks are dressed in white robes; the bishop leading the service wears a coloured outer garment over his light-coloured robe. One after the other, there are prayers, the visitors are blessed and the consecrated bread is broken. For an outsider like myself, this order is difficult to understand. Brother Girgis takes pains to explain the individual steps of such a service to me. It can last up to three hours, obviously an

exhausting challenge even for monastic brothers from the desert who are expected to start their day here every morning since people very slowly arrive to fill the church. Those who skip the first hour still have a long way to go, after all. This monasticism is a central building block of the Coptic Church in Egypt and what is more, it is the cradle of European monasticism.

Unlike in Europe, Egyptian monasteries have no worries about finding novices. About ten percent of all Egyptians are said to belong to the Coptic Church today. No one knows exactly, and the impression is probably not entirely wrong that the state would like to reduce the number of Egyptian Christians even further. In fact, the state sees itself as Islamic. For many years, churches and other Coptic institutions were only allowed to be built after obtaining state permits, which was a difficult undertaking. Illegally erected buildings had to be torn down. Even repairs to churches or monasteries, which were often urgently needed, had to be approved by the bishops in a complicated procedure. At the end of this bureaucratic process, which could take years, even the head of state had to sign the permit.

It was not until 2016 that parliament repealed this discriminatory rule. President Abd el-Fattah as-Sisi had made the protection of the Coptic minority in the country one of his policy goals because they had been repeatedly exposed to attacks by radical Islamists since the 1970s. Especially after the coup of the current President



The Suryan Monastery in Wadi Natrun cannot complain about a lack of novices either.

as-Sisi against President Mohamed Mursi, who came from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood, outraged Islamists burned down a total of 63 churches, destroyed Coptic schools, looted shops of Christian traders and murdered Copts. The mob did not even spare orphanages and monasteries. In their eyes, the Copts were responsible for the coup against their president, although the coup plotters were almost all Muslims themselves. In the following years, there were also attacks against churches and Coptic priests were murdered. Since 2016, over a hundred Copts have died in attacks in the country.

It is no wonder then that the majority of Egyptian Christians seek their salvation and security in the dictatorial president. After all, he was the first president ever to attend a Christmas service in St

Mark's Cathedral in Cairo to demonstrate his special protection towards this Egyptian minority. There is no doubt he also wanted to send something of a message for religious tolerance to other Christian countries that had repeatedly criticised him harshly for human rights violations.

In the new administrative capital near Cairo, as-Sisi went one step further. He had the world's largest Coptic cathedral built there, a monumental building that can accommodate up to 8,000 worshippers. Right next to it, an equally large mosque. "Egyptian Muslims and Christians are one", is the message forged in concrete and steel.

*Jörg Armbruster  
was ARD (German TV) correspondent for  
the Near and Middle East until 2012.*

## Respect for the “pastor’s collar”

Observations between metal detectors and machine guns

He knows Ghana very well. He lived in Nigeria and then came to Cairo for a year as pastor of the German congregation. However, Riley Edwards-Raudonat quickly realised that Egypt is not similar to anything he had previously learnt about Africa.

On Palm Sunday this year, a friend from Nigeria wrote to me: “Hi Riley, I am reading about violent attacks on churches in Egypt. How do you feel about this? Do you feel safe in Cairo?” I was surprised by the request because I hadn’t heard of any such attacks so far. But it may just be me. Of course, such incidents would make headlines here, but they are written in Arabic, which I can neither read nor write nor speak. So, it’s quite possible that I wouldn’t even hear this news which would be vital for my existence here.

Therefore, I immediately started an internet search and quickly found what I was looking for. Yes, there had been two suicide bombings on Palm Sunday. The Church of St George in the northern Egyptian city of Tanta and the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral of St Mark in Alexandria had been affected. They were atrocious attacks leaving 47 dead and 126 injured. However, they had been carried out on Palm Sunday 2017. My friend in Nigeria had read an article that appeared on the 5th anniversary of the attacks.



Even if the reference was not recent, I was glad to have received it. That is because suddenly it made much more sense to me that the churches here in Cairo are under police protection. In the German-speaking Protestant congregation we must report our church services and other events to the police every month. On these occasions, the police then set up metal detectors in front of the church and all visitors have to go through them.

When I first saw this, I thought to myself, “We know our members. Why do we need such controls?” But that was naïve. People who have been in the country for a long time do not question these precautions. There is usually a benevolent tone to such protective measures. For example, on a recent walk, I happened to pass a





Rev. Riley Edwards-Raudonat in front of the door of the German Protestant church in the Cairo district of Boulaq with members of his congregation.

Presbyterian church of the Egyptian Nile Synod and thought to myself: “Why don’t you knock? Maybe someone will open up.” But no one answered. I was about to leave. Suddenly there was a policeman standing right next to me with a semi-automatic weapon in his hand. “Yes, hello!” I thought to myself, a little startled. But he looked at me kindly and told me – rather with his hands and feet – that no one was there at the moment. He had seen the pastor leave. Then he offered me a chair next to his little guard house. I understood. I could wait in the shade for the pastor to return. I gratefully accepted the offer. But unfortunately, no one was coming back any time soon. So, I would have to give it a try another time.

These controls are outwardly disconcerting to me; a machine gun on the open

road is no small thing. Nevertheless, it is all well-intentioned. Once you have overcome your fears, you become quite aware of it.

If I had dressed visibly as a pastor that day, for example with the white collar that is customary in this country, the encounter would certainly have been even friendlier. That’s because with a collar, I make myself recognisable here as a religious leader, and this status enjoys a high respect in Egypt. I notice this every Sunday during my duties at the German Protestant Secondary School in Cairo. Although Sunday is a normal teaching day there, it begins with a school service which I hold. I always wear the white “pastor’s collar” for this, and I simply leave it on for the school day afterwards. →



It is not easy to get a good view over Cairo. The author and his wife tried on a hill outside the mega-city.

It is then that I often feel a particular kind of respect, especially from the many Muslim pupils, teachers and the service staff. Those who don't know me so well sometimes ask me about my role, whether I also have a congregation or am otherwise active as a pastor outside the school. A Catholic colleague told me that he was once attacked at night in Cairo, which is rather unusual here. When the perpetrators realised that he was a clergyman, they not only immediately let him go, they even showed that they were frightened for themselves.

In Nigeria, clergymen also enjoy a high level of respect, no matter what religion or denomination they belong to. However, this usually does not extend so far that criminals would be ashamed of their acts against clergymen. At the beginning of 2020, a pastor of the "Church of the Brethren" in Nigeria was not only kidnapped, but even shot dead on camera.

On the other hand, it seems to me that religious borders in West Africa are somewhat more permeable than here in Egypt. In both Ghana and Nigeria, I know people

who were born and raised as Muslims but later became Christians. There are also Muslim women who converted to Christianity when they married a Christian. I don't know about anything like that happening in Egypt. If a Muslim woman marries a Christian, the man has to convert to Islam first. In the case of Christian women, they are allowed to remain Christian when they marry a Muslim. But the children are invariably brought up in the Muslim faith, which often leads to Christian mothers converting to Islam at some time.

However, West Africa and Egypt have at least one thing in common: Religion shapes everyday life, and in both countries, I know of many encouraging examples of Christians and Muslims living together peacefully.

*Rev. Riley Edwards-Raudonat was Africa Liaison Secretary at the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) until his retirement in December 2017. From 2018 to 2020, he was vacancy pastor in the German Protestant congregation in Lagos. Until the end of June 2022, he was a pastor in Cairo for one year.*

## EVS members amend constitution

**Stuttgart (EVS).** More than fifty members of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) unanimously amended the constitution in the following points in a virtual, extraordinary general meeting at the beginning of May: A new provision was included to the effect that, in future, a representative of the two sponsoring churches of the two schools should also have a seat on the Executive Committee of the Association. Moreover, it was decided that the Treasurer is also authorised to represent the Association.

In the Rules of Procedure, it was decided that the minutes of the General Meet-

ing should be sent to members within a period of eight weeks. Any objections can then be submitted within the following six weeks. After that, the minutes will be regarded as accepted. Previously, the deadline was until the next General Meeting the following year.

The quorum of the board was also redefined. In future, there must be at least six members present. In cases of emergency, resolutions can also be passed using the circular procedure (by e-mail) and meetings and alternatively, assemblies can be held over electronic channels.

## Invitation

**The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) invites all its members and friends to the next General Meeting on Sunday, 18 September 2022 in Stuttgart.**

The worship service in the Luther Church in Fellbach will begin at 10 am. The Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, Hosam Naoum, will preach the sermon. The Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman belongs to his church. Also present will be Rev. Canon Donald Binder, the Archbish-

op's Chaplain, and Rev. Dr Khaled Freij, Director of the TSS.

After the service, the General Meeting will take place at the Paul-Gerhardt-Haus, August-Brändle-Strasse 19. The fact that the EVS is holding its General

Meeting in September this year instead of November as usual is due to the 50th anniversary of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS), which will be celebrated on this weekend in late summer.

A written invitation with further details will be sent to all members in due course.



## Building where others are tearing down

New carpentry workshop opened at JLSS

**Lebanon is a country that is deeply wounded. Yet, whereas the political and economic collapse and the port explosion of August 2020 in Beirut have had the same effect as a wrecking ball, a new carpentry training workshop was handed over for its intended purpose at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) at the end of April.**

The old workshop which was almost 70 years old had become unstable due to settlement of the soil. Nothing more could have been done to save the building. So, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) collected money for a new building, and the Schneller Foundation together with the Swiss Schneller Association (SVS) also contributed funds to equip the building.

The General Secretary of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS), the Chair and the Executive Secretary of the EVS, the President of the SVS as well as numerous members of the local Schneller Board travelled from Beirut for the big ceremony on 27 April. Even the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in Lebanon, Andreas Kindl, came to the Bekaa Valley to attend this festive occasion. And for the students at the school, it was quite an unusual pleasure to chat with a real ambassador for once.

In bright sunshine, the ribbon was cut in front of the entrance to the building. Reverend Habib Badr from the National Evangelical Church in Beirut said a prayer of blessing and this was followed by a few

short speeches. Kerstin Sommer, Chair of the EVS, presented the carpenters with a wooden insect hotel from the Protestant Church in Baden – in the hope that such ecologically useful objects will soon be produced in the new workshop.

During a tour, everyone could see for themselves how beautiful and functional the building had become, with several classrooms on the upper floor. Finally, Ambassador Kindl, Reverend Badr and Association Chair Sommer planted three Lebanese cedars in front of the entrance. This was the crowning finale of several tree planting campaigns that had already taken place with the participation of the students a few weeks earlier. The reason for this was that the winter storms of the past few years had toppled several old trees on the Schneller grounds. But everywhere,



German Ambassador Andreas Kindl in conversation with JLSS students.





The new carpentry workshop: big, functional and built with an eye to the future.

new seedlings had sprouted from the seeds of these trees and they have been carefully nursed and cared for over the past few months. Rev. George Haddad, Director of

the school, had bought some more seedlings with the idea of creating a new wood on the school grounds.

After so much practical work, we went over to the institution's church, where Klaus Schulten and Britta Giesecke von Bergh performed a concert for organ and trumpet as part of the "Lebanese Organ Week". In order to maintain distances as required by the pandemic, only half of the boarding home children were able to attend. However, the other half of the children did not miss out as the concert had already been performed the day before.

Finally, the day ended with a festive meal which the JLSS kitchens had produced with a lot of effort. For many of the participants, so much joy and cheerfulness were a welcome break from everyday life which is more than hard in the current Lebanese crisis.

*Uwe Gräbe*



EMS/Gräbe (2)

EVS Chair Kerstin Sommer plants a small Lebanese cedar at the JLSS.



## So that everyone can keep up

A programme for children with learning difficulties at the TSS

The Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman provides the so-called “Slow Learners” programme to support children and young people who have learning difficulties. They receive support lessons that are individually adapted by a special education specialist.

There are various reasons why children have learning problems. But in many cases, it is due to the family situation. Orphans and children, whose parents have separated or who come from families where there are terrible conflicts and strong violence, often find it difficult

particularly important for them to keep up in mathematics and Arabic in order to graduate from school. So, these subjects receive special emphasis.

About 20 students are taking part in the programme, including Palestinian refugee children who live in the “Hittin” camp adjacent to the TSS, as well as children who fled with their parents from Iraq to Jordan. The admission criteria for the programme, as with all other TSS programmes, are not based on origin, skin colour, gender or religion. Only need plays a role.



EMS/Gräbe

An individual learning programme is created for each pupil in order to address the individual challenges as best as possible.

to follow lessons. Many of them have attention deficit disorders, are hyperactive or have difficulties fitting into a group of peers.

For some years now, the TSS has been offering a special programme, licensed by the Jordanian Ministry of Education, in which children and young people with learning difficulties receive tutoring adapted to their individual needs. It is par-

The costs for the programme are around €550 per child per school year. The TSS would like to expand this offer to cater for more children and hire another special needs teacher.

# The fire for Schneller work is spreading

## An almost-alumnus recalls

**He is neither a former Schneller volunteer nor has he done an internship at one of the two schools. But Rev. Ursus Waldmeier has been associated with the work for decades. He was President of the Swiss Association for the Schneller Schools (SVS) for almost ten years.**

» Even as a teenager, I was fascinated by the Arabic culture and the language of the region where our Christian faith originated.

So, when the then president of the Swiss Aid Committee for the Schneller Schools asked me, a young pastor in my first parish in 1986, whether Rev. Gabriel Zabaneh, the then director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School, could come to me for a long weekend, I immediately said “yes”. Since then, I have been convinced of the concept of sending Christian and Muslim children from dysfunctional family backgrounds to school together so that they can get to know each other, develop respect for each other and earn their own living after graduation.

The person who I would especially love to talk to again is Rose Lohrmann. I met her in April 1995 on a congregation trip to Jordan. She was running the day school at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) at the time. I can still see her summoning a guard in somewhat pointed Arabic to lead us around the school grounds. She seemed to me like a general who had everyone at her beck and call. At the same time, she ignited this fire in me for the Schneller schools. I felt her zeal for the welfare of the children as a living faith in a unique way. Sadly, she died in 2005 at the age of 71.

Since that encounter, the work in the SVS has grown even closer to my heart and I became its president in 2013. Since then, with the exception of the two Covid-19 years, I have been to both schools every year, and I feel really at home there. I now spend a lot of time learning the Arabic language so that I can also talk a little with the children and staff. And as long as my strength allows me, I will continue to devote myself to the Schneller work.



Rev. Ursus Waldmeier (r.) und Rev. Khaled Freij, Director of TSS

I would advise young people who want to do voluntary service at one of the Schneller schools not to try to impose their own standards and ideas. It is better to simply share life with the local people as they understand it. That means look, listen and understand. Then it will be an enormous enrichment for everyone.



## “Transforming society in humility“

German-Lebanese consultation on public theology

“Public theology” reflects on the theological basis of the social impacts of Christians and their churches. This issue arises in all contexts, no matter how different they are. At the end of April, theologians from Lebanon and Germany met in Beirut to discuss issues facing churches and Christians in German and Lebanese society. The event took place as part of the 50th anniversary of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).

Sometimes current events brutally overtake theological discussion. This is exactly what happened with the 7th International Consultation hosted in Beirut in the Easter week by the Protestant Near East School of Theology (NEST) and the EMS “Study Programme in the Middle East” (SiMO), which offers students an ecumenical study year at the NEST. In his presentation, Berlin professor Torsten Mereis spoke of the role that churches have played in rescuing refugees in the Mediterranean and how strongly public debate in Germany was divided about this. Then, less than three days later, a refugee boat capsized off the Lebanese port of Tripoli – six dead, including one child, all of them Lebanese who had set out on this perilous journey.

Only 30 participants came to Beirut – half of them from Lebanon and half from Germany. The SiMO and the NEST host a joint consultation every three years. However, this year, it could only take place on a smaller scale because of the disastrous economic and political situation in Lebanon.



The Maronite Catholic Archbishop of Beirut, Boulos Abdel Sater, received the group at his episcopal palace.

At the end of 2021, the theological debate in Lebanon about the role of Christians and their churches became a very topical issue. An ecumenical group of theologians from the Middle East had presented a document entitled “We choose abundant life” which discusses the situation of Christianity in the region ten years after the so-called Arab Spring (see detailed report in Schneller Magazine 1-2022). Two authors presented the paper. Souraya Bechealany, former General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), stressed the need to depart from the Middle Eastern social model of protected “minorities” coexisting side by side and move towards a civic model where all citizens have equal rights and responsibilities. Co-author Najla Kassab, pastor of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon and President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, spoke of the revolutions in the Middle East in recent years – they were not dead,



EMS/Gräbe

but were in intensive care, so to speak. The churches were called upon to revive their ideas by providing protected spaces for public debate.

Protected spaces of this kind are sometimes more important than the self-confident public airs that a privileged church gives itself. The Maronite Catholic Archbishop of Beirut, Boulos Abdel Sater, agreed with this. He personally received the participants of the consultation at his episcopal palace. Reflecting on the enormous influence that Maronite institutions continue to exert in Lebanese society, he said in a pensive tone: “We will probably have to give up some of our power. Or we will disappear.”

George Sabra, President of the NEST, agreed with this in his presentation. Theology in Lebanon was often “too public”. The leaders of the state-recognised religious communities appeared with great

frequency in the public media. Whether their statements were theologically sound, however, was increasingly called into question. Sabra is therefore in agreement with his professor colleague Günter Thomas from Bochum. Thomas spoke of the rapid contraction of the churches in Europe, of marginalised theology, the relevance crisis and experiences of loss from Germany’s standpoint. Only through a radical hope based solely on God’s creative power could a church in humility still transform society. This hope was the church’s very own contribution to all social debates. The church was denying itself if it did not make this contribution and instead continued to argue like any other social actor.

Mireille Hammouche, Programme Director of the Syrian-Lebanese NGO “Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue” picked up on this point: “People are suffering because religion has been abused in our country for so long,” she said, referring to Syria and Lebanon and her personal war experiences. Faith-inspired ethics, she said, must be used to re-humanise neighbours who had been demonised for so long. The survival of every single religious community in the Middle East depended on the survival of all religious communities.

*Dr Uwe Gräbe, Head of the  
EMS Middle East Unit and Executive  
Secretary of the SiMO Programme*

## Working together on issues of life and faith

A personal look back at 50 years of the EMS

A young Indian woman becomes a Christian and is disowned by her family. This story, shown in a film by a “home missionary” of the Basel Mission, touched me very much as a child. I was fascinated by books about Africa from an early age, and later the Biafran war haunted me. The question “What can we (in Europe) do for the poor, suffering people in the “Third World”?” moved me as it did many people. Then, in the anti-apartheid movement, the perspective changed. Now it was about solidarity with people across borders.

The Association of Churches and Missions in South-West Germany (EMS) was founded in 1972. Its motto “Receiving and passing on” was quickly felt. EMS materials and slide series were helpful in the solidarity movement with Southern Africa because they featured black voices speaking for themselves.

Then, as a young pastor, I became part of the ecumenical urban and industrial mission in Tema, Ghana, as an EMS worker for four years. I was the only European on the team under Ghanaian management. At the same time, Rose Akua Ampofo from Ghana left a lasting mark on learning from the other in the Palatinate. Such encounters became a hallmark of the EMS Fellowship. EMS ecumenical speakers, such as Eagle Ndabambi from South Africa, Peter Kodjo from Ghana or Kamal Farah from Israel-Palestine, challenged us to overcome any thinking of “home”

In 2017, an EMS symposium in Bad Boll dealt with the controversial topic of „mission“. In order for exchange on these issues to be fruitful for everyone, everyone is expected to give a high degree of sensitivity in dealing with each other and respect for each other.



and “mission field” and to see ourselves as part of the one mission of God on six continents.

As a congregational pastor, the partnership between the district of Göppingen and a presbytery in Cameroon became an ecumenical place of learning for me, in close connection with Basel and Stuttgart. In adult education, important impulses came from people like Klaus Schmid, Stephen Alando from Ghana or Victor Joshua from India. They helped us to see our own situation with different eyes. EMS country booklets, religious education drafts, and the magazine “darum” first published in 1983 provided helpful information.

In 1992, I joined the EMS Secretariat as Africa Liaison Secretary. The “Jerusalem Forum” of the EMS in 1991 had become a milestone on the way to a fellowship on three continents: Women and men from ten countries had called for participation, solidarity and power sharing. In 1994, delegates from the “partner churches” in Af-





rica and Asia were given full voting rights on the executive management body, the Mission Council. At the same time, the goal was formulated to legally clarify the full membership of all churches.

There was a change in the quality of meetings. “Partnership” had been a key term since the founding of the EMS, but

it was mostly centred on Germany. A network gradually grew with exchange between all churches. The Mission Council meetings in Indonesia in 1998, in India in 2003, in Ghana in 2009 became milestones. Power sharing also meant sharing responsibility. So, by

2003, common “Theological guidelines” had been developed. The framework concept of “Shared witness” emphasised the “Sharing of life issues” in addition to the exchange of staff and the sharing of financial resources.

This spirit of walking together took on a more and more practical shape, for example at women’s and youth consultations and at consultations on topics such as “Christians and Muslims” or “Reconciliation”. Encouraging experiences from Lebanon, Ghana, Korea, Japan and Indonesia in peace witness or in work with migrants were exchanged through common focal themes. Close relationships between the EMS countries developed in the exchange of co-workers and in the Ecumenical Youth Volunteer Programme. The intercultural Bible reading brought together about 250 groups from 20 countries over a period of 15 years and provided intensive experiences in sharing questions of faith. In the EMS Fellowship, everyone contributes to the common budget and financial support for programmes and projects is jointly decided on with shared responsibility.

The development of a new constitution and the transformation of “the EMS” into the “Evangelical Mission in Solidarity” in 2012 was the consequential step towards implementing what has been the EMS spirit from the very beginning. What had often been tried out in small steps over four decades has now been a living reality for the past ten years: a fellowship on three continents in “common witness”.

*Rev. Dr Bernhard Dinkelaker was General Secretary of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) from 1996 to 2012.*



## “Questionably balanced” or “Alternative facts”

Discussion about a thesis paper on Israel and Palestine

**The topic of Israel-Palestine can fast become a hot topic issue in Germany. Lectures, events, publications – anything that deals with Israel and/or Palestine can quickly be publicly ostracised. Church statements on the subject are correspondingly rare. Five Protestant churches on the Rhine and Ruhr have nevertheless dared to do so.**

The reason for the thesis paper, in which the Protestant churches in Baden, the Palatinate, Hesse-Nassau, the Rhineland and Westphalia position themselves on Israel and Palestine, is clear: At the beginning of September, a good 5,000 representatives of the 352 member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) will meet in Karlsruhe for the Assembly and the Israel-Palestine issue will feature prominently on the agenda. But unlike in the German church landscape, where relations with Judaism and Israel have traditionally been of great importance, those who maintain intensive contact with the Palestinian churches set the tone in the worldwide ecumenical movement. It is no secret that they want to coerce the Protestant churches in Germany to take a stance in Karlsruhe.

To take the wind out of their sails, the spokespersons of the five churches for Jewish-Christian dialogue have joined forces to seek “as far as possible a consensual language in the debate” on the relationship with Israel and Palestine. They have formulated five central ideas, each with explanatory theses. What is striking is that, in addition to the usual emphasis on the attachment to Judaism with its historical

roots in Israel, emphasis is also placed on the historical roots of Christianity in the land between the Mediterranean and Jordan. “The Palestinian churches, as it were, assert this universal horizon of reference to the land on behalf of Christianity,” it says.

The authors of the paper also recognise “boycott measures as a legitimate non-violent form of political resistance against actions contrary to international law worldwide” in principle. However, they reject a total boycott against Israel, as demanded by the BDS movement, on the one hand due to the background of German history, and on the other hand “because it indiscriminately affects an entire collective and also affects those forces that are working for justice and peace in Israel itself”. And finally, the demand for an end to settlement construction and occupation leaves no doubt that the five churches see justice for Palestine as a necessary basis for lasting peace.

This paper is seen as a respectable basis for discussion in groups of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Harsh criticism, however, comes from those who have “a good connection to Israel”, as the magazine *Israelnetz*, for example, claims. It attests to the authors’ lack of understanding “for the complexity on the ground”. The fact that the churches speak out in equal measure for the well-being of Israel and the Palestinians is an expression of a neutrality that is not possible. All in all, the churches are trying to strike a balance in a questionable way, according to the reproach.

Strong criticism also comes from those who have been campaigning for more



Christian heritage in Palestine: the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem

solidarity with Palestine for decades. For them, the paper does not go far enough. Both the Kairos-Palästina-Solidaritätsnetz Deutschland (Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network Germany) and the Forum Friedensethik (Forum for Peace Ethics, FFE) in the regional church of Baden criticise that the paper does not do justice to the asymmetry of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. To dismiss this asymmetry as a view of the Palestinians and not to recognise it as a fact is dubious. The pa-

per therefore “enters the field of alternative facts” and “ideological bias”. “What is being done to the Palestinians is downplayed,” states the FFE statement. The paper shows “a clear partiality in favour of the state of Israel”.

The paper is also critical of the Jewish self-image, which is postulated in the paper as “the inseparable relationship of the Jewish people to the promised land with Jerusalem in the middle”. This fixation on the “Promised Land” is a core element of Zionism, which was and is controversial even within Judaism. The sweeping talk of the “Jewish people” ignores the different currents in worldwide Judaism. Both the FFE and the German Kairos Palestine Network therefore explicitly distance themselves from the thesis paper. Under no circumstances can it be presented as a consensus within the churches at the WCC Assembly, they say.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*



The thesis paper (PDF) can be downloaded from the website of the Westphalian Church. Short-URL: <https://tinyurl.com/3nmfke7s>

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*How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

Ps 36:7



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