

3/2017

SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



AGAINST THE SAD TREND
GROWING CONGREGATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools

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Dear Reader,

Our special feature in this issue takes a look at a little-known phenomenon. Despite all the reports that have appeared for years describing the suffering and sadness that Christianity has had to bear in the Middle East – here in the Schneller Magazine too – it may be surprising to place our focus this time on growing congregations in the Middle East. In no way do we wish to detract from the suffering and tragedy of those sisters and brothers who are threatened by persecution and who see no future any more in their homeland. They deserve our solidarity.



On the other hand, we do not want to overlook the new growth that is happening in many places in the Middle East. Christians from all over the world, in particular developing countries, come to work in the states of the Persian Gulf or to Israel and they find a temporary home in the churches there. Non-Christians find something in the Christian faith that they have not found in their previous religion. Yes, congregations also grow because people convert. Those who are interested in religious coexistence in the Middle East should not hide this side of the coin, even if there is no easy answer to the question of how to deal with the impacts of conversion. No matter what your personal answer is to this question, dear Readers, we hope you will join us on this excursion into the diversity of Christian life in the Middle East.

Of course, this issue again includes news about the Schneller schools whose work is especially dear to us all. It is all the more gratifying to report many new and positive things about the schools, about the work the two institutions are doing for refugee families from Syria and about new projects. We are grateful for your support, your thoughts, your donation and your prayers.

With this in mind, I send you many greetings on behalf of the entire Editorial Team

Yours

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Katja Dorothea Buck".

Katja Dorothea Buck

STANDING UP FOR OUR SISTERS AND BROTHERS

In the Middle East growing churches are only reality in places which receive very little attention. Most Christians from long-established churches in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and also Palestine can only dream of full pews at worship services as they were only a few years ago. The requests and calls for help that we receive from individuals and organisations make it abundantly clear to us of the breath-taking speed at which the number of Christians in the region is diminishing. Of course, there are many reasons for this. Who could blame a responsible father for finding a place that is safe for himself and his family? Or a mother who wants to offer her children the opportunity of a good education? Or a newly wedded couple who yearns for a future together in peace? For Christians in the Middle East, the prospects of a good future are not very good. Once the first leave and others follow, it starts a trend that is very difficult to stop.

But then there are the few who want to stay, holding out and hoping for a better future in their homeland. Church leaders in the Middle East keep on telling us that Christians are often the only ones who can mediate between different Muslim opponents with any credibility. Even in conflicts between Jews and Muslim, Christians are welcome mediators.

So how should we respond? I think it is time to start a major offensive to stand by the side of our Christian sisters and brothers in the region. "So then, wherever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." (Gal. 6:10) This can be achieved by numerous education projects. Schools and university places are the first approach to provide children and young adults with future prospects. Vocational training should also be made possible so that young women and men can take their rightful place in a multi-faith environment



Photo: Katja Buck

They fled from ISIS in Syria: Assyrian Christians from the Khabour Valley hold a service at a Beirut church. Many of them are waiting for the green light from one of the western embassies to allow them to leave the Middle East for ever.

and assert themselves as Christians in society. The Schneller schools have already helped many young people to get jobs.

Christians in the region should continue to benefit from the global solidarity of Christians from all over the world. This will work if Christians from America, Africa or Latin America all pledge their support for a small minority of the Christian faith in Israel, Palestine, Syrian or Northern Iraq. Then it will help. And if Christians in Lebanon take a responsible role in politics and make their contribution, it may have a positive impact on the entire region.

We too should not take our prayers for our sisters and brothers lightly. The more we focus in our congregations on the situation of our sisters and brothers in the Middle East, the more we can draw attention to them and the more information and knowledge our congregation members will receive.

There are other ways we can call attention to the plight of our sisters and brothers in the Middle East. Many companies have business relations in the region and some of them do very good business there. Many pastors are members of the Lions Club or the Rotarians. What if they were to speak to their Lions or Rotarian friends in industry about relations of this kind and bring the special situation of Christians there to their attention? Managing directors of companies who are members of our congregations could be informed about the situation of Christians in the Middle East. The same applies to members of our regional parliaments and the Bundestag, some of whom travel extensively throughout countries in the region. Why not speak to one or the other and bring up the topic

of Christians there? Those who travel to the region and are well informed will see more.

And one final thing: many people ask what is more important – helping people irrespective of their religion, origins, gender or nationality, or giving preference to Christian women and men?

Luckily for us Christians, this is not a dilemma. We know from Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan that a person in need should be helped, no matter what religion he or she belongs to or the social circumstances that led to their plight or what the overall situation is. On the other hand, we know that as Christians we should stand very closely by our Christian sisters and brothers, as it says in the Epistle to the Galatians. So, both are called for – Giving support to one's neighbour and to our sisters and brothers in the Christian faith, so that more churches may continue to grow in the Middle East.

Reverend Klaus Rieth heads the section for Mission, Ecumenism and Development Cooperation at the Church of Württemberg and is member of the Mission Council of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity.

GROWING AND DYING

Migration and conversion give rise to new congregations

There is no end to reports about the decline of Christianity in the Middle East. But despite the upheavals which this region is currently experiencing, one thing is often overlooked: there are also Christian congregations which are growing despite or precisely because of all opposition. Of course, there are many reasons for this.

The religious landscape in the Middle East is currently going through fundamental changes. Some churches are threatened with extinction. Either their Christian members are expelled or they emigrate more or less on a voluntary basis to seek a future for themselves and their children in western countries.

But there are also trends in the opposite direction. It is a little-known fact that churches in the Gulf states are posting amazing growth rates. Very soon new churches will be dedicated every year, normally on sites provided to Christians by the (Muslim) governments.

This development is a direct consequence of the immigration of workers from countries such as the Philippines, India, South Africa or Egypt. Migrant workers come to the Gulf for a few years to perform jobs which the local population is not prepared to do. They are employed on construction sites, work shifts in hotels and restaurants or are on the go almost round the clock as domestics or housemaids. Very often they are regarded as second-class people and are entirely at the mercy of the whims of their employers. Very few of them voice their

complaints. They depend on their wages which often go to support an entire extended family back home.

They find comfort and fellow sufferers in the churches as well as people who listen to them and who stand up for their rights – as far as this is possible. The churches in the Gulf are growing because there is not enough work in other parts of the world. The question is, however, are they part of Middle Eastern Christianity? The answer is yes, from a geographic viewpoint, since the Middle East is not a protected name and the Gulf states are always regarded as part of this region in other contents. When viewed from the aspect of church history, it is an interesting mixture that only occurs in this form in the Gulf. Besides the known Oriental churches of the Middle East, such as the Coptic, Armenian or Syrian Orthodox churches,



Photo: Latin Patriarchate

The Catholic migrant parish in Jerusalem celebrates mass

where Christian guest workers from Middle East countries meet, there are the Evangelical, Anglican and Catholic churches where services or mass are held just as in Cape Town, Manila or Chennai. The people bring their way of holding services or mass with them from their home countries. Every Sunday, services or mass are held in many different languages and liturgies in the churches in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. It couldn't be any more ecumenical. On top of all this, Christians in the Gulf need have no fear of persecution due to their faith, provided they keep to certain rules. In general, services or mass can be held undisturbed in the official churches.

In Iran, on the other hand, it is much more difficult to live the Christian faith. But despite all this, new congregations still spring up there and the congregation members are not guest workers from abroad but Iranian women and men who have converted to Christianity. Nonetheless, apostasy from Islam is relentlessly pursued in

Iran. Those who are found out must flee the country. Otherwise he or she risks receiving long terms of imprisonment.

As recently as the middle of July, four converted Christians were sentenced to heavy prison sentences, among them the well-known pastor Reverend Youcef Nadarkhani who set up many unofficial house congregations. He received a sentence of ten years in prison after which he must live two years in exile. In 2010, Nadarkhani was sentenced to death by hanging by an Iranian revolutionary court for "apostasy from Islam". In the wake of international protests, the authorities released him in September 2012. It is not only Iranian human rights organisations which declare that the latest sentences are a sign of the fear of the Iranian government in the face of the growth of the Christian faith in Iran.

There are also reports of the increase in churches in Algeria where 99 per cent of the population are Sunni Muslims. At the turn of the century, Evangelical groups in the USA in particular started to bring the Christian faith to Algerian women and men and were amazed when they met with open ears. There are no official figures but it is estimated that there are about 30,000 converts. Compared with a population of 32 million, this is really a microscopically small number. In former years, however, they were next to no conversions at all. Sociologists explain the interest in Christianity by the spiritual emptiness which spread throughout the country after decades of socialism and a bloody civil war. Socialism led to a quagmire of corruption and Islam was also in discredit since jihadist groups had killed tens of thousands of people in the name of Islam. As a result, people were very open to new ideas.



Mass on International Migrants Day

But the political and religious establishment did not appreciate this trend at all. In 2006, the Algerian government issued a law prohibiting missionary work and made everything that led Muslims away from their faith a punishable offence. Although there are still occasional convictions under this law, unofficial house churches continue to survive in Algeria as before.

The topic of “growing congregations” only becomes a tricky issue when conversion is involved. On the one hand, it is good when a person finds something that gives new meaning to his or her life, but this personal decision should not be generalised. And it should not be advertised under any circumstances, as Evangelical groups very much like doing. The Christian religion does not become any truer if a Muslim becomes a Christian. Otherwise the contrary should also hold water, that Islam is the truer religion whenever a Christian becomes a Muslim.

The same applies to various forms of living the Christian faith. There are repeated complaints among the official churches in the Middle East that Evangelical and charismatic groups entice their members away from them. There too, something grows in one place where something dies in another. People find something in the new forms of living the Chris-

tian faith that was missing in their previous churches. It should not be overlooked that this hurts those who find support and identity in traditions that are centuries old and we should appreciate this fact. On the other hand, the new blossoming groups should not be avoided. Ecumenism must remain open to new ideas, if only to keep on reminding new groups that they have no claim to sole representation and that they should not isolate themselves. No matter how and in which form people believe in Jesus Christ, in the end there is one body and we are all sisters and brothers in the faith.

Katja Dorothea Buck



Photo: Uwe Gräbe

Lively building activity in the Jordan Valley: new churches are going up at the birthplace of Jesus.

THE “OTHER” CHRISTIANS OF ISRAEL

New forms of Christianity in the Holy Land

While many Palestinian Arab Christians have left their home country in the past decades, there has been a substantial number of non-Arab Christians who have immigrated to Israel. Tens of thousands of Christians live in the south of Tel Aviv alone where there are many churches – Orthodox, Oriental, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal and Messianic congregations and parishes as well as a variety of sects.

Since 1948, Christian dependants of Jewish families and Christians who have Jewish roots have immigrated to Israel. Above all they regard themselves as Jews. The most well-known examples include the Roman Catholic Carmelite priest Oswald Daniel Rufeisen from Poland who made headlines in 1959 when he requested to be recognised as a Jew in Israel. Or the Dominican Bruno Hussar who founded the Jewish and Arab peace village of Neve Shalom. The case of “Brother Daniel” first brought to many people’s attention the very existence of these new Christians.

New structures had to be found for them to live their faith. For the first time in church history, Hebrew became the language of a Christian ethnic group. The Hebrew Catholic Vicariate was originally founded as the Apostolate of Saint James the Apostle in 1955. Its mission right from the start has been to establish that it is possible to be Catholic and Israeli at the same time, speak Hebrew and become integrated in the life of Israeli Jewish society.

After the immigration waves from countries of the former Soviet Union brought about one million people to the country between 1990 and 2005, non-Arab Christians in Israel make up about a quarter of the Christian citizens (between 30,000 and 40,000). Due to the pressure of wanting to seek integration in Jewish society, many hide their Christian identity, assume Jewish customs and even convert to Judaism. This process is even more successful among the children of immi-



Photo: Latin Patriachate

Icon of the patron saint of Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel. The Virgin Mary with a scroll in Hebrew.

grants. They are taught in the secular Israeli Jewish school system where they have almost no contact with the Christian faith or the traditions of their parents. The state also promotes conversion to Judaism for those who already have a certain Jewish heritage. This is especially the case in the Israeli army where young people are encouraged to join the “mainstream” by formally becoming Jews. The Institute for Jewish Studies started its work in 1999 and aims at the conversion of thousands of non-Jewish Russians every year. The Israeli army also has its own courses for non-Jewish soldiers.

The number of Christians in Israel has also increased due to the tens of thousands of migrant workers and asylum seekers, the majority of whom come from Asia and Africa. At the beginning of the 1990s, many African and Asian migrant workers came to Israel and replaced the low-wage

Palestinian workers who now find it more and more difficult to work in Israel from the occupied territories. Tens of thousands of carers were also brought to Israel to look after elderly, handicapped and sick people. Many migrant workers only stay for a limited period of time but some of them start a family in Israel and want to stay. Their children are also integrated in the state school system, speak Hebrew and identify to a great extent with their host country.

For the State of Israel, which defines itself as Jewish, the new Christian ethnic groups pose a dilemma. Whereas Christian Arabs are distinctly different from the Jewish mainstream since they generally live in Arab-speaking communities and are geographically and institutionally separate from the Jewish Hebrew-speaking environment, many of the new Christians live in the heart of Jewish society. The new Christian Israeli citizens place no political



Photo: Latin Patriarchate

demands on the state and make every effort to integrate themselves completely.

Meanwhile, there are small indications that this Christian presence is accepted. Since 1996, for example, Christian soldiers are allowed to pledge their loyalty to the army on a copy of the New Testament. The challenge for these Christians is to pass on their faith to their children in the midst of a strongly secularised Jewish society.

The Asian, African and Latin American faith communities have also founded many different congregations, mainly Evangelical and Pentecostal Charismatic. Many are led by single pastors who rent rooms in the districts where migrants live. Churches have sprung up in dozens of shops, flats and shelters in the south of Tel Aviv. Evangelical and Pentecostal missionaries from abroad have also established organisations in Israel with the aim of not only attracting the new Christians but also Jews, Muslims and Arab-speaking Christians. Among them, support for Christian Zionism is great.

In Jewish Israeli society, there is widespread scepticism about Christianity and Christians. This is based on theological arguments (“Christianity is idolatry.”), historical wounds (“Christians treated Jews badly.”) and ideological animosity (“Christians sided with Palestinians during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”). In some Jewish circles in Israel this contempt is even paraded in public. There are occasions when churchmen wearing traditional clothing are spat upon, anti-Christian slogans are sprayed on churches and Christian institutions, Christian property is damaged and many media sources are rife with condescending posts against the Christian faith. In view of this anti-Chris-

tian sentiment, the most vulnerable are Messianic Jews, many of whom recently came to Israel and claim that they believe in Jesus Christ while being members of the Jewish people at the same time. They are the brunt of verbal and daily attacks by religious Jewish organisations which stir up hatred against the Christian “mission” and conduct an anti-Christian debate flanked by political activities.

Of course, there are also groups within the Israeli society which are very active in informing Jews about Christianity, the Christian minority in Israel and the need for dialogue. But there is still a lot of work to do to convince the Jewish majority to accept Christians and all the other non-Jewish groups as an integral part of Israeli society.

David Neuhaus SJ is a Catholic priest and is responsible at the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem as Patriarchate Vicar for Hebrew-speaking Catholics and is also Coordinator of Pastoral Care for Catholic migrant workers and asylum seekers in Israel.

HOSPITALITY AND RECONCILIATION

Services are again held in two Anglican churches in Israel

The churches stood empty and derelict for a long time. Until recently, the three Anglican churches in Jerusalem, Acre and Jaffa were still symbols of loss and expulsion. Now they have been rededicated to allow parish life to flourish again.

During the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, thousands of Palestinians were forced to abandon their houses. They sought refuge in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. Among them were many members of the Anglican church in the Holy Land. When the war was over, the Green Line separated the Jerusalem parish in the east of the city from St Paul's Church in the west. Parishioners were no longer able to hold church services any more. The parishioners therefore met in the Church of Christ in the Old City and in 1953 they finally moved to St George's Cathedral.

Many parishes situated on the Israeli side of the Green Line were able to continue as before and grew in time, for example in Haifa. Other parishes declined due to the war and then gradually diminished over time. At some time or other, the churches were empty, such as in Acre and Jaffa.

Even the parents of Archbishop Suheil Dawani, the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem, were among those who were forced to flee from Jaffa in 1948. One of Archbishop Suheil's wishes is to restore the abandoned churches in Israel so that their parishes can grow again. In 2011, St Paul's church in Jerusalem was rededicated.

Since then, the Arab-speaking parish of Jerusalem meets there once a week and Korean and Indian parishes also hold their services there.

At the beginning of this year, I had the privilege of attending the rededication of St Saviour's Church in Acre. It is remarkable how quickly it was possible to restore the building. Only 16 months before, it was only a shell without a roof. Everything was piled up with rubbish. Today, it is a beautiful, modern room. The returning parishioners who had held their services before in Haifa and Shefr Amr came to the rededication. Representatives of other Christian churches in the city also attended as well as Muslim and Jewish representatives. They came in such numbers that some of them had to stand in the inner courtyard and in a marquee during the service.

Theophilus III, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, spoke warm words of encouragement in a wonderful sign of ecumenical friendship. We all hope that the church will not only be a place of worship but also a meeting place for the parish and a safe place for holding youth programmes in Acre. The church is again playing a role beyond the local parish. On Palm Sunday, the diocesan meeting took place there and was also on the agenda of the visit by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who visited the country in April. At Whitsun, we received parishioners from St Saviour's in Acre here in Jerusalem to celebrate together the coming of God's Holy Spirit to his Apostles.

During the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, we also visited St Peter's Church in Jaffa which Archbishop Suheil would also like to rededicate. That is the church where his family attended services at one time. Between the piles of books and stacked pews, Archbishop Justin Welby prayed for the restoration of this church and that the Anglican community would again return to Jaffa. The church was once a place of worship for the international English-speaking community. At that time, foreign workers from the embassies and consulates in Tel Aviv had to travel to Ramla or Jerusalem to attend services.

In the past, the churches were symbols of loss and departure but now they have become signs of renewal. The principles of hospitality, ecumenism and reconciliation form the basis for their rededication. These principles are also the focus of Archbishop Suheil's period of office and I hope that these values will be upheld in the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East after his office.

Joel Kelling is executive assistant to the dean of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem. The Theodor Schneller School in Amman belongs to the Jerusalem diocese.



Photos: Jack Karn



Two years ago, St Saviour's Church in Acre was still a ruin. Today, services are again held there.

HOME PORT AND PLACE OF REFUGE

The special task of churches in the Gulf

The Gulf region encompasses the Kingdom of Bahrain, Kuwait, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Republic of Yemen. Christians have lived there since the 4th century. To this day, Christianity in this region remains a spiritual and cultural force.

The present laws in the Gulf states prohibit the proselytising of Muslims. However, the presence of Christians is tolerated and Christians can celebrate services in church buildings inside the walled compounds. The churches are only prohibited to hold worship services in Saudi Arabia.

Seventeen cities in the Gulf provide state land for more than 40 church buildings where mainly foreign and migrant congregations meet for services. This privilege does not apply to all churches, which is why different denominations sometimes share the buildings. This often leads to wonderful co-operations. Together they strive to maintain good relations with the government and together they look after migrant workers.

The Bible Society in the Gulf (BSG) was established in 1999 and is a member of the global network of United Bible Societies (UBS). The USB supplies the churches in the Gulf with bibles in more than 60 different languages. All our centres – including a bible store in Aden in Yemen – are officially approved by the local authorities. Bibles are allowed to be imported fully legally.

In 2013, the church leaders of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental, Anglican and Evangelical churches in the Gulf formed an ecumenical association – the Gulf Churches Fellowship. Its purpose is to foster relationships based on trust and a network of people from all Christian churches in the Gulf which share a common understanding of mission rooted in the joint theology of the churches.

The Christian congregations in the Gulf mainly consist of economic migrants. Since many of them are only there for a limited period of time, they cling to their language and culture. It is estimated that there are 125 nations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). 84 per cent of the total population are migrants. This is the highest percentage world-wide, followed by Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. Each language and cultural group prefers to keep to itself. The church plays a key role in bringing the flock of like-minded people together. For the Christian congregations in the Gulf, the church is a safe haven where they feel at home and seek refuge in difficult times.

Church leaders from the Gulf region see a variety of challenges and opportunities. It is obvious to Andrew Thompson that many Christians want to remain permanently in the Gulf. He is Pastor of the Anglican Church in Abu Dhabi which has several new church buildings there. He therefore sees the churches' main task in focusing on the life of migrants in relationship to the local population. Christians should therefore receive instruction and be equipped so that they



Photo : : St. Andrew Church

Representatives of Christian churches in Abu Dhabi pay a visit to the Sheikh Zayid Grand Mosque.

can lead their lives as Christians with integrity and authenticity.

Cameron Arenson, former Senior Pastor of the Evangelical Church in Abu Dhabi, sees the main challenge for Christian churches in the Gulf in creating a missionary platform. This means that Christians come together here from the whole world. For the Kingdom of God, the Gulf region is a dynamic place from which it can spread His influence.

Bill Schwartz, one of the archdeacons of the Anglican diocese in Cyprus and the Gulf, finds that the church can make a positive contribution to clearing up misunderstandings between Christian and Muslim communities. All in all, the Christian presence in the Gulf encourages inter-faith dialogue in society, either in the field of education, the health sector, at the workplace or in numerous other areas.

Then again John Folmar from the United Christian Church of Dubai sees the Gulf region as a place where peoples and cultures come together and this represents an enormous potential for evangelisation. He encourages people to move to the region and openly live as Christians among the peoples. Life among the peoples paves the way for more understanding of the other and this opens the door to a life in safety and reconciliation. Viewed from this aspect, the impact of the church in the Gulf today is immense.

Dr. Hrayr Jebejian, Executive Secretary of the Bible Society in the Gulf

ARAB WELCOMING CULTURE

Church life is allowed to flourish in Abu Dhabi

Although there is no full freedom of religion in the United Arab Emirates (VAE), the Gulf country shows a generosity of hospitality towards the Christian minority. There, dialogue is advancing among the churches as well.

No other country can be compared to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) when it comes to welcoming Christians. Against the backdrop of bad news from the Arab world and the worrying trend of intolerance and racism in the West, the small Gulf country has found a way for Muslims, Christians and many others to coexist in a community that is mutually beneficial and harmonious. This goes far beyond a society that tolerates the religion of the other. On the contrary, they strive to actively welcome foreigners in their country by offering them hospitality in a very practical way.

More than 50 congregations come together on our Anglican church compound alone. They have different languages and traditions, such as the Korean Methodist Church, the Indian Pentecostal Church, the Church of Pakistan and the Chinese Evangelical Mission. They are joined by the Ethiopian, Greek, Syrian and Russian Orthodox Churches, the Mar Thoma Church of South India, the All Nations Full Gospel Filipino Church and the Sri Lankan Calvary Church. However, there are no legally recognised Emirati Arab congregations.

Next door is the home of the mighty Roman Catholic Church where on average

45,000 people celebrate mass every week. The masses are held in more than twelve languages. In Dubai, the neighbouring emirate, St Mary's Catholic Church is apparently the largest Catholic parish in the world, and that in a situation of minorities. The estimated 75,000 people who attend mass every week can literally paralyse the traffic – for hours. Here in Abu Dhabi there is also the Coptic Orthodox Church and the American Evangelical Church which also boasts a thousand members. Our greatest challenges here are the car park problem and crowd control.

Directly next door to us is the Crown Prince Mosque, a beautiful, majestic building that overshadows all the churches in the neighbourhood, although many see it as an attempt at intimidation. Personally, I see it as an expression of neighbourliness. The call to prayer mixing with the sounds of a Christian service five times a day is a constant source of inspiration and wonder.

The right to entice or evangelise others to one's own faith is more and more frequently taken as a yardstick by Christians in the West to measure the degree of religious freedom in a particular country. In the UAE, evangelisation is prohibited and this prompts some Christian organisations to maintain that a certain form of persecution is practised here. But this is a narrow viewpoint that clouds the whole issue. In the UAE, people are cautious and define enticement from the faith as a forced conversion where pressure and manipulation are exerted. However, these are practices which no church would ever use, at least I hope so.



Photo: St. Andrew Church

Reverend Andrew Thompson during service with a child from his parish.

In my personal experience, I have never had any difficulties in speaking openly about Jesus and my faith. But I know that there are some people who get into trouble because they talk about their faith in such a way that it may have an insulting effect on others. For example, when they distribute bibles indiscriminately or pass on papers which directly criticise the Muslim faith.

The repercussions for a Muslim who decides to convert to another faith differ from case to case. The main threat comes almost always from the families of the convert himself or herself. In all the years I have been living in the UAE, I have never heard of the government persecuting an Emirati for turning away from Islam. Nevertheless, turning away from the faith in Islam is still a major crime. To this extent full religious freedom does not exist in the UAE.

But we can say that the UAE grants others cultural freedom. The government allows religious minorities to hold services without the authorities intervening or checking up. The main condition is that worship services should take place as far as possible in a religious centre for this purpose. Many groups do not abide by this and do not celebrate their services in these “official” churches. The government refrains from molesting these groups as long as no complaints are received for violating public order or security.

In 2016, the UAE appointed the first state minister for tolerance. A national agenda for strengthening the value of tolerance was also rolled out and Christian churches are regarded as partners in promoting and supporting the agenda. Inter-faith dialogue has noticeably become a trend in the region.

Even before, I was already involved in dialogue, both at grass roots level in the form of talks with numerous Muslims and at higher level with local religious leaders during church-sponsored programmes. We always discuss topics of mutual interest including “How do we confront our fears of one another?” or “How do we use our scriptures for good?” We prefer to select topics of collaboration rather than confrontation.

The discussion on the topic of fear was particularly revealing since some of our Muslim guests admitted how hard it was for them to cross the threshold of the church gate to come to us in our community hall. This hesitation is an expression of the general worry that they might not be welcome. The growing Islamophobia in the West was linked in their heads to us Christians. For us it was a shock to hear

that the church is regarded as a threat, even if we are in the minority. It reflects the experience of the Muslim community in the West, and even more the experience of refugees.

The highlight of these Christian-Muslim meetings is always eating and drinking together. It is an occasion when friendships can be made and mutual understanding and appreciation can grow.

Another platform for Christian-Muslim dialogue is the publication sector in the UAE. My book “Jesus of Arabia: Understanding the Teaching of Christ Through the Culture of the Arabian Gulf”, (Motive Publishing 2015, 232 pages) adopted the works of the late theologian Kenneth Bailey as a valuable tool for Christians and Muslims. The main purpose was to help people to find a way of talking about Jesus which avoided the inevitable convoluted and intractable debates about trinity or soteriology. Instead Christians are encour-

aged to be curious about the culture in the Arabian Gulf. It can be a means for them to deepen their understanding of the teachings of Jesus. Muslims are encouraged to address the teachings of Jesus, who was after all a child of the Middle East. At the beginning of 2017, “Jesus of Arabia” appeared in Arabic and it was selected as a book of interest during the local literature festival.

Reverend Canon Andrew Thompson has lived in the Gulf for much of his life. In 2010, he started his service at St Andrew’s Church in Abu Dhabi. Besides his degree in theology he holds degrees in Behavioural Science and Islamic Studies.



Photo: St. Andrew Church

A child is baptised at St Andrew’s Church in Abu Dhabi.

CORDIAL INVITATION TO THE SCHNELLER FESTIVAL 2017

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) is convening this year's General Meeting in Stuttgart-Botnang

on Sunday, 22 October 2017

All friends of Schneller work as well as EVS members are cordially invited.

The day of the festival starts with a worship service in the Church of Nikodemus (Fleckenwaldweg 3) at 10am. Reverend Habib Badr from Beirut will deliver the festival sermon.

After the service, the official EVS General Meeting will take place in the community centre (Fleckenwaldweg 7). The agenda includes the election of the new Executive Board.

After a lunchtime snack, the Federal Cross of Merit

will be officially presented to Reverend Klaus Schmid

(ret.). The EVS Chairman will be commended for his many years of commitment to Schneller work.

At 15.30, Professor Heiner Bielefeldt will then speak on the topic of

“A disputed human right: Religious freedom within the context of the United Nations”.

Between 2010 and 2016, Bielefeldt was UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He holds the Chair for Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg.

All EVS members will receive a written invitation including the agenda and itinerary in good time. To help us with the organisation of the Schneller festival, it would be helpful if all those interested would apply to the EVS Secretariat by Thursday, 5 October 2017 at the latest (feist@ems-online.org or +49 711 63678-39).



**EVS Evangelischer Verein
für die Schneller Schulen**

EARNING A LIVING FROM SEWING

Khirbet Kanafar (JLSS). The training courses for Syrian refugee mothers are a resounding success. After attending the three-month training course on sewing at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS), more than half the women are now able to feed themselves and their children from the proceeds of their work. This is what the school director, Reverend George Haddad, was able to find out. He reports that some women have found full-time jobs as seamstresses at a small factory. “Normally these firms require many years of professional experience before they let female workers work on the sewing machines.” Some of the women who learnt the trade at the JLSS were able to start straight away on the machines. “After they tested the first woman from our courses, they were convinced of the quality of training. The other women were able to sit at the sewing machines without any further tests,” says Haddad. One woman was even earning 50,000 Lebanese pounds a day (about 30 Euro), which is a decent daily wage even by Lebanese standards. She is the topic of conversation among the refugee women, says the director.

In the middle of May, another training course started at the JLSS for Syrian refugee mothers. As in previous courses ten women are attending the three-month training. The husbands of the women are either dead, missing or in prison. Lebanese designer Carmen Zino instructs the women in the basics of sewing and tailoring. Every morning, they and their children are picked up by bus from the refugee camp in Marj. At school, they receive a snack and a hot lunch every day. An addi-

tional teacher hired especially teaches the children while their mothers are learning to sew.

The programme is financed by the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) and by the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).



Syrian refugee women learning to sew at the JLSS.

ECUMENICAL REFUGEE PROJECT AT THE TSS

Amman (TSS). This summer, a joint Anglican and Catholic school aid project for refugee children from Syria started on the grounds of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman. In collaboration with Caritas Jordan, the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East, the school’s sponsor church, is looking after Syrian refugee children aged from one to five years on the premises of the TSS kindergarten. Under massive media interest, the Anglican Archbishop Suheil Dawani, and Caritas Jordan General Director, Wael Suleiman, signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Amman defining the apportionment of tasks and roles between the contracting parties.

The TSS and the Al Ahlieh and Bishop School in Amman are expected to host a total of 160 children from refugee families. The project is part of the “Mother and Child Fundamental Needs” project run by Caritas Jordan in cooperation with Caritas Germany.



Many Syrian refugees are living in towns and cities in Jordan but very often they lack even the basic necessities.

SOLAR POWER FOR AMMAN

Amman (TSS). Earlier than expected, a Jordanian company started installing the photovoltaic system on the roof of boarding home of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman. The first modules were delivered in June during the month of Ramadan and installation was completed on the roof of the school building and the roof of the boarding home by the end of July.

The photovoltaic system is a dream come true for the TSS. Electricity from solar power will significantly lower the school’s running costs. The photovoltaic system was only made possible by a major donation from the Kirchentag 2015. At that time, the entire collection totalling 133,000 Euro received at the opening service went to the Schneller schools. Part of this money can now go to pay for the system in Amman.



The first modules of the photovoltaic system are lifted onto the roof of the boarding home.

TOUR TO LEBANON

Anselm Kreh is organising a private guided tour to the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) from 23 to 31 May 2018. Kreh is member of the Executive Board of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) and worked as ecumenical co-worker at the JLSS for many years. Since then, he has offered several tours to Lebanon which not only visit the tourist attractions in the country but also provide the opportunity to meet the local people. He always likes to accommodate his tour groups at the JLSS guest house. This offers participants many opportunities to acquaint themselves with work at the school, the boarding home and in the workshops.

Since the plane tickets can only be booked once the final number of participants is known, the total costs can only be estimated. Kreh assumes that the price will be about 1,000 Euro per person. The final date of registration is 1 February 2018. If you are interested, please contact Anselm Kreh directly at Anselm.Kreh@web.de or by phone on +49 7322 21152.

SCHNELLER FOUNDATION DISBURSES 70,000 EURO

Stuttgart (EVS). Despite the generally difficult situation on the equity markets, the *Schneller Foundation – Education For Peace* was able to disburse significant sums of money in the tenth year since it was established. This was also possible owing to balances which were not apportioned in previous years. During a meeting of the Foundation's Board of Trustees in June, it was decided to allocate 20,000 Euro this year to the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon to continue its heating

project. After good results with the new heating systems in various buildings on the school grounds, all the other buildings will be gradually equipped with economical and efficient heating systems.



Photo: EMS/Buck

The heating project at the JLSS can continue thanks to the Schneller Foundation.

The Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Jordan also receives 20,000 Euro for renovations to the sanitary facilities at the boys' boarding home. The local administrators had placed this at the top of their list of renovation schemes. In addition, the JLSS will be supported with up to 20,000 Euro to partially finance a CNC lathe for the training workshops and up to 10,000 Euro will go towards an organ in the JLSS church (see page 24).

By the way, we will inform Foundation endowment donors about such projects in a newsletter every two years. Some copies of the last donor letter issued at the end of 2016 are still available and are obtainable from the EVS if anyone would like to find out about the Foundation. (See rear page of this issue for the address.)

For Reverend Klaus Schmid, Chairman of the EVS, this was his last meeting on the Board of Trustees of the Schneller Foundation. He will resign from his post at the General Meeting in October. It was a very

special moment during a short devotion when he again remembered the many people he had met in nearly five and a half decades of his work for the Schneller schools – Christians, Jews and Muslims from countries in the Middle East and the whole world. “It will be difficult to fill the gap you leave behind,” said Ambassador Dr Martin Schneller (retired), Chairman of the Foundation Board of Trustees, in his words of thanks to Schmid.

NEWS FROM THE PRESCHOOL IN SYRIA



There's good news from the preschool for refugee children in Kafroun (Syria). In May, the children went on an outing to Mount St Mary's (Jabal al-Saida) accompanied by their caregivers and teachers. Besides the many games they played outdoors in the fresh air, the programme included a picnic and many discovery trails in nature. Once a month, a doctor comes to the preschool to examine the children's state of health at the preschool. When the weather permits, Dr Qeis likes to examine the children outdoors to dispel their fears of the examination. All in all, the preschool in Kafroun can look back on a successful school year 2016/2017. All the children's parents and brothers and sisters came to the ceremony at the end of June to celebrate the end of the school year. The children were finally released to go on their school holidays with a large bag full of presents and sweets.



37 participants came from all over the world to Bad Boll.

“MISSION OF NETWORKS”

Bad Boll (EMS). “Mission in Solidarity – so that they may live a life in fullness”. This is the title of the topic lasting several years, what we call the focus on the international EMS Fellowship. Part of the programme in 2015 and 2016 included visits by mixed national teams to various EMS member churches in Indonesia, India, Ghana and Germany (Baden and the Palatinate). The foreign visitors were asked to observe how the various churches understand their mission.

37 participants from all over the world gathered in Bad Boll in June to attend a closing symposium to evaluate the team visits. The Middle East was aptly represented by Rana Zankoul who works as pastor at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman. She took part in the team visit to Baden and the Palatinate and was sent as

a delegate to the symposium in Bad Boll by the Anglican Church.

A special highlight was brought by a long-term Schneller friend from Lebanon: “Mission – Religion – Values... In a Fragmented World” was the topic of the public keynote speech by Dr Nasrallah van Saane to mark the official opening of the symposium. In today’s world, mission should no longer be a “Mission of Expansion”. Instead we should make it a “Mission of Networks”, says Rima Nasrallah, who lectures in practical theology at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut. On the path of expansion, we may perhaps gain a few individuals from another religious group to Christianity, but in many cases, this would make the other group into an opponent. However, if we manage to win over adherents of another religious group as friends into our network, then we gain access to the entire

network of this individual – and also to a group which would otherwise remain closed. As an example, Rima Nasrallah quoted a young man from a traditional Shi'ite region in southern Lebanon who had become part of the NEST network in Beirut and so had opened up very surprising insights and contacts within his own network.

Nasrallah's speech also marked the official closing of the festival of the worldwide church and mission of the Baden-Württemberg Church.

THE EVS AT THE KIRCHENTAG

Berlin (EVS). It was a very special Kirchentag that took place in Berlin and Wittenberg at the end of May this year. On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, everything was a little bigger than usual. The Christian festival was spread geographically like never before with "Kirchentage en route" and the world exhibition in Wittenberg.

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) was also present with a large stand which included the traditional Café Salaam. While the Kreh family transported the materials to Berlin in their time-honoured fashion and supervised the construction of the stand, Dr Rischmaui and his wife from Cologne baked delicious Arabic baklava which were offered to the Kirchentag visitors by the numerous volunteer stand assistants.

There were many good conversations – with old acquaintances such as the departing President of the Lutheran World Federation, Bishop Munib Younan from Jerusalem, the Raheb pastor family from Bethlehem, German church representatives and curious passers-by from Berlin who had never heard of the Schneller schools before. Only once was the question asked whether the schools bore this name because they offered a faster way to the school leaving certificate ("schneller" in German means faster). Of course, our Kirchentag team members were amenable and replied to this question exhaustively as well as other questions.



A great team: The assistants on the EVS stand at the "Market of Possibilities".

Photo: EMS/Gräbe

A close-up photograph of several organ pipes, showing their metallic, reflective surfaces and the intricate details of their construction. The pipes are arranged in a row, with some in the foreground and others receding into the background.

APPEAL TO ALL MUSIC AND SCHNELLER FRIENDS!!!

Who can help us so that the sound of an organ from Scotland can soon ring out at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon? Organist and music teacher Klaus Schulten located a small organ with eight registers in a church in Scotland. The school can have to organ for nothing since it can no longer be played at its location in Scotland because the church has fallen into disrepair and is not in use any more. Schulten, who was organist at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem for some time, knows the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon and knows that its founder Hermann Schneller had always dreamt that an organ would accompany worship services in St Michael's Church on the school grounds.

This has also been a long-standing dream of the present director George Haddad. His enthusiasm knew no bounds when he heard about the Scottish organ. He has already convinced the school's supervisory board which is unanimous in backing this project.

The organ itself costs the school nothing but the school must foot the bill to dismantle the organ in Scotland, transport it to Lebanon and re-assemble it at the JLSS. Schulten estimates the total cost at about 40,000 Euro – an amount which the JLSS is unable to pay by itself. This is why the school is asking for the support of all music lovers and Schneller friends. At its last meeting at the beginning of June, the Board of Trustees of the Schneller Foundation subsidised the project to the tune of 10,000 Euro. But more support is needed. The school is now hoping for individual donors from all over the world.

You will find the number of the EVS donation account on the inside rear page of this issue. Please quote the keyword "Orgelprojekt JLSS" (JLSS organ project) on all bank transfers.

“ENCOUNTER IN TRUTH”

The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople visits Württemberg

“Now be on your way! Refrain forthwith from writing to us about doctrines but merely for the sake of friendship, if that is what you want. Farewell!” With these words, Patriarch Jeremias II ended a four year long theological correspondence with members of the Protestant Theological Faculty in Tübingen in 1583. A good four centuries later, the university has picked up the thread again.

The dialogue from the 16th century is unceremoniously referred to as “Tübingen I”. Using the keyword “Tübingen II”, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Württemberg, the Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) now want to make contact again. As part of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, they sent an invitation to the present Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholemaios I: “For the sake of friendship.”

On 29 May 2017 – incidentally the 564th anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans – His All-Holiness arrived in Stuttgart. At the reception in the Old Palace (Altes Schloss) followed by Orthodox Vespers in the Stiftskirche (Collegiate Church), the EKD Council Chairman Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, the EKD Bishop for Ecumenical Relations and Ministries Abroad Petra Bosse-Huber and the Right Reverend Frank Otfried July, Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Württemberg, committed themselves to an ecumenism of mutual knowledge and appreciation going far beyond debates about dogma and doc-



His All-Holiness Bartholemaios I in the Stuttgart Stiftskirche.

trinal differences. The Patriarch replied to this in the following way: Ecumenism, says Bartholemaios I, is not a search for truth but rather “a genuine encounter in truth”, as it exists in Jesus Christ.

Besides observing the high-ranking guests at the reception in honour of the Patriarch, it was worthwhile casting a look at the diversity of the Orthodox retinue which had gathered around the church leader: Serbian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox and Russian Orthodox church leaders were present at the ceremony and wanted to speak to German Catholic and Evangelical church representatives. Bishop Dr Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg represented the German Catholic Church. He also chairs the ecumenical commission of the Catholic German Bishops’ Conference. In the end, many encounters “for the sake of friendship” actually took place on this day and the “genuine encounter in truth” took on a very definite meaning.

On the following day, the Patriarch travelled on to Tübingen where he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the theological faculty.

Uwe Gräbe

“RELIGIONS ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION”

Conference on the Responsibility of Religions for Peace

Foreign policy has discovered religions. At the end of May, the Federal Foreign Office invited around a hundred religious representatives from all over the world to Berlin to attend a unique conference on the responsibility of religions for peace. Among the guests were many partners and friends of Schneller work.

German foreign policy is placing great hopes on religions in its peace work. Recently the Foreign Office set up a new task force entitled “Responsibility of Religions for Peace”. At the end of May, a high priority was placed on the international conference on this topic. Guests from all over the world as well as representatives from theological faculties, churches and church organisations in Germany gathered in the historical *Weltsaal* in the Foreign Office building. Among the guests were General Secretary of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) Jürgen Reichel and Executive Secretary of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) Uwe Gräbe.

Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel painted a very distinct picture of the opportunities and limits of this diplomatic initiative. People who merely promote the stereotype that religion always makes conflicts worse are making a big mistake, he said. They block out the complexity and the ambivalent effects of religion. Although it is true that the prime responsibility of states in the international community is to create and maintain peace in their international relations, long-term peace work should also harness the

strength and continuity of religions. “Who better to do such work than those whose scriptures and faiths place such importance on peace?” said Gabriel to the invited guests.

Rabbi David Rosen was quick to acquiesce to these words. The present International Director for Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee (AJC) is also a quasi-unofficial foreign secretary of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in Jerusalem. In Rabbi Rosen’s opinion, violence usually has less to do with religion and more to do with a feeling of belonging to a group. This is strengthened by the identity-forming nature of religion, but all too frequently it is abused to generate a “self-righteousness” which fuels and reinforces violence. The purpose of interreligious co-operation should be to integrate different identities. “If one does not want religion to be part of the problem, then one must ensure that religion is part of the solution,” said Rosen.

What was noticeable was that many of the international participants came from the Middle East. The guests present were people with whom the EMS and the EVS are connected in various ways. Besides David Rosen (see *Schneller Magazine* 2/2014, p14-15) they included Sarah Bernstein, Executive Director of the Rössing Center for Education and Dialogue (formerly the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations; see *Schneller Magazine* 2/2016, p6-7), Bishop Munib Younan from Jerusalem, the Bethlehem pastor Mitri Raheb, Sheikh Moafaq Tarif, spiritual leader of the Druze community in Israel,



Photo: EMS/Gräbe

Group photo of non-German religious leaders: among those in the front row are Bishop Munib Younan (Jerusalem), Rosangela Jarjour (FMEEC), Church President Andrea Zaki (Cairo) and Reverend Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem)

Rosangela Jarjour, General Secretary of the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC) and Church President Andrea Zaki from Egypt.

Of course, such events can also be regarded with a critical eye. One issue that emanated mainly from the circles of German participants raised the question of whether the achievement of the modern age was not to separate religion and state and by contrast whether events such as this conference could not be regarded as a relapse. On the other hand, Agnes Abuom from the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches argued in favour of “critical solidarity”. She said that religions should not bind themselves to the state but should enter into a partnership with it to work for peace.

In the end, the vote of the Bosnian Grand Mufti Husein Kavazovi was thought-provoking. He was one of the main proponents working towards full reconciliation after the massacre of Muslims in Srebrenica (1995). Multi-ethnic societies are always more vulnerable than others, he said. In order to create a climate to promote peace, a central issue is how members of a religion behave within their own religion towards others beyond ethnic borders – this is a consideration which is constantly re-infused with life in the EMS Fellowship.

Uwe Gräbe

SECURING THE FUTURE

SUPPORT THE SCHNELLER SCHOOLS WITH A LONG-TERM ENDOWMENT!

The Schneller schools promote Christian peace education in the Middle East. For over 150 years, the name of Schneller is linked to untiring commitment to the education of children and young adults in tolerance and peace. The two Christian schools are open to all children, irrespective of their religious affiliations. They offer a haven of security and reliability. The *Schneller Foundation – Education for Peace* was established in 2007 to safeguard this work in the long term and to overcome economic downturns. Contrary to donations which are used immediately, an endowment has a long-term effect and becomes part of the Foundation's trust capital. Only the interest is used to fund the actual work of the Schneller schools.

Do you want to support the Schneller Foundation? Then just contact us! By the way, your endowment is tax-deductible. Should you wish to donate larger amounts, we advise you to consult a notary or tax consultant in advance. You can also make an endowment in the form of an inheritance or a legacy. An endowment is useful for you to preserve your personal life's work beyond your own lifetime or to honour the life's work of a relative.

Schneller pupils look back happily on their school days. With your help, children from broken families can receive sustainable prospects for their future lives through the Schneller schools – also in many years to come. Make your contribution to securing peace in the Middle East.

Give them the gift of a future!

Your contact
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**EVS Evangelischer Verein
für die Schneller Schulen**

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Contact with our readers is invaluable for us. We are delighted to receive all your letters, even if they are critical or represent a different opinion than that of the editors. We reserve the right to edit your letters for space reasons.

The Editorial Team

Response to Schneller Magazine 2/2017

Many thanks for the new issue of the Schneller Magazine. I find it a good thing that you included the Center for Islamic Theology and the Messianic Jews among the voices of the Kirchentag slogan.

*Senior Church Council member (ret.)
Jürgen Quack, Reutlingen*

Many thanks for sending the new issue. It has become an interesting magazine. I read it with pleasure.

Reverend Christof Hartge, Bad Wildungen

EVERY DONATION COUNTS

The Schneller schools in Lebanon and Jordan can only carry out their work with and for the children through the support of many donors. The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) ensures that the funds are used for the welfare of the children. We are grateful that many people support the schools regularly. We are also delighted to receive one-off donations of any amount. Every donation counts!

132nd Year, Issue 3, September 2017

Publisher: Evangelical Association of the Schneller Schools within the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity – EMS

Editors: Katja Dorothea Buck
(editor in charge), Ursula Feist,
Dr. Uwe Gräbe

Translation: Chris Blowers

Cover: EMS/Buck // page 1: Kleinfeldt //
page 23: EMS/Buck // page 24: EMS/Buck //
page 28: EMS/Buck // Rear page: EMS/Buck

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Seat of the Association: Stuttgart

Layout: B|FACTOR GmbH

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The Schneller Magazine is published four times a year. If you want to be informed regularly on the publication of a new issue please send us an email to evs@ems-online.org.

The Schneller Magazine is also available in German and can be read online www.evs-online.org/publikationenmedien/zeitschriften/schneller-magazin/

SCHNELLER

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) is a member of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).

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Evangelische Bank eG,
IBAN: DE59 5206 0410 0000 4074 10
BIC: GENODEF1EK11

Endowment contributions to the Schneller Foundation:

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IBAN: DE09 5206 0410 0000 4074 37
BIC: GENODEF1EK1



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We look forward to your support of the work of the Schneller Schools.

Please visit us on the Internet at www.evs-online.org



I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Jeremiah 31:3



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for the Schneller Schools