



## Torn between uncertainty and hope

The new Syria and its Christians

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**Dear Readers,**

The news we are receiving from Syria is extremely confusing and sometimes totally contradictory. The most heated debate revolves around the extent to which democratic forces can cooperate with the current Islamist-dominated Syrian government and the role that smaller social groups such as Christians can and will be allowed to play in the new Syria.



For this issue, we asked our Christian partners in various regions of Syria and in the diaspora the following questions: How are you doing? What is your experience of current developments? What options do you (still) have? The picture that emerges from their responses is exceptionally complex. They express a palpable fear of violence and oppression and that Christian communities may be reduced to playing a traditional minority role. At the same time, they speak about astonishing new freedoms and hopes of full civic participation. All of this clearly shows that the final word on Syria's future has not yet been spoken. There are still many options open. Let's hope that things turn out for the best!

There are many positive developments at the Schneller Schools in Lebanon and Jordan at present. Over the past two semesters, Ms. Odette Haddad Makhoul has gradually settled into her new role as Director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School. At the end of May, she was the gracious hostess of a concert held in honour of her predecessor, George Haddad. And while many people around the world and especially in the Middle East believe that this is a time of collapse, destruction and murder, the 'Schneller family' in Jordan has once again shown that it is also a time of reconstruction, creativity and healing. At the end of May, the fully refurbished boarding home building was inaugurated at the Theodor Schneller School. Director Khaled Freij accepted a distinguished award from the King of Jordan on behalf of the TSS. But why not read all about it yourself in this issue?

On behalf of the editorial team,  
I wish you a wonderful and blessed summer.  
Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Uwe Gräbe".

Uwe Gräbe, Pfarrer

# Keeping alive the longing for the Kingdom of God

**A**t my confirmation many years ago, I received a gold chain with a pendant consisting of a cross, a heart and an anchor symbolising faith, love and hope. The three hallmarks of Christianity. "...and the greatest of these is love," writes Paul in his famous ode to love (1 Cor. 13).

For the past two years, I have been living and working in Lebanon as pastor in the Evangelical congregation in Beirut. Here I have learned that the greatest of them all is hope. It is harder to maintain than faith and love. The endless conflict in the Middle East that erupts into war and violence time and time again. The hopeless coexistence of religious communities in Lebanon. The inability to identify and deal with injustice, corruption, the causes of war and peace agreements. This is not happening either legally or socially. And then there is one disaster after another. All this wears many people here down.

Hope for change, hope for improvement? "Forget it!" they say with a wave of their hand. "Perhaps these are the end times," some say. Others say, "Humans are so utterly selfish that it makes a free, good society impossible." But others say, "Let's just stick together in our group (clan, religious community, etc.) because the world is going to end anyway."

Personally, I stand in the middle, preaching every Sunday and spreading Jesus' „good news“ of the coming Kingdom of God. During the week, I have to keep hope alive in the congregation every day – at least that's what's expected of me.

Can I still go on doing that? Am I slowly losing hope too? Never-ending news reports of more and more violence, more and more deaths, growing trauma, wrong political decisions. And then those constant drones in the sky, their noise ringing in your ears and getting literally on your nerves! The world is turning into a madhouse. This is what many people think here. Is that what I think too?

The two words „answerability“ and „accountability“ in the Epistle of Peter pose me a particular challenge. So, am I supposed to give coherent reasons why

*Always be ready to give  
an answer to anyone who  
demands from you an account  
of the hope that is in you.*

1 Peter 3:15

I believe in "hope"? We watched the Bonhoeffer film in our parish; no, not the new one, but the one by Eric Till, starring Ulrich Tukur. We thought about where this man found the hope and courage – right up to the end. And then he was still executed. Isn't everything in vain?

No! This man in particular shows us the power that hope can develop. Today, 80 years after his murder, he inspires Christians worldwide to take a clear stand, to raise their voices, to become a "church for others", to show how being a Christian today can be guided and justified responsibly by the Bible.



And that is exactly what I am experiencing here in Lebanon, especially in the Evangelical churches. They are a small minority, more of a grey spot among the colourful religious communities here, without any pomp and privilege. But they are courageous, sincere, clear and direct in their message to the public, in true Protestant fashion.

It starts by telling things as they really are. What happened in the civil war? How did it start and why? Was there anything we did not want to see? What must be confessed and repented? And how can reconciliation be achieved?

These are some of topics of discussion and public lectures (NEST). This takes courage. And it impresses me – and others. It doesn't go unnoticed. It shows something of the "answerability" and "accountability" of our faith that we owe to the world. In the crises of their time, Christians and congregations grow into prophetic witnesses to the possibilities of living the Gospel.

I found agreement and encouragement in the clear Protestant brevity of Gerd Theissen, a constant guide of our community's Bible studies:

*Faith is saying yes to reality,  
love is saying yes to the possibility.  
Both give rise to the hope  
that what is possible can really  
become reality.*

...

*Faith and love  
create hope.  
Hope remains.*

The gold chain may no longer exist, but I still have the pendant. It reassures me how faith, love and hope are interdependent, helping me to believe and to love, so that I can continue to hope and keep alive my longing for the Kingdom of God.

*Rev. ret. Renate Ellmenreich  
has been ministering to the German-  
speaking Evangelical congregation  
in Beirut for the past two years.*

# A burden and a calling

What it means today to be the Church of Jesus Christ in Syria

Christians have lived side-by-side with Muslims for centuries, sharing both joyful and painful moments. However, for the past ten years or so, the Christian community has been facing an existential threat. Churches and Christians are responding to this situation in very different ways.

In modern democratic societies, minorities are a sign of cultural richness and a respect for diversity. But in Muslim-majority countries like Syria, minorities have often been treated as second-class citizens. The Assad regime, in power from 1970 to 2024, was authoritarian and repressive. It falsely claimed to be secular, mainly to mask its fear of the Sunni Muslim majority. To protect its hold on power, the regime cracked down on all forms of political Islam. At the same time, it claimed to defend minorities from the Sunni majority, using this claim to justify its rule and to protect its base within the Alawite sect. This strategy helped build a regime rooted in tyranny, corruption, and the suppression of freedoms.

The regime deepened fears among Syria's minorities – Christians, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, and Kurds – that Sunni Islamists would persecute them if they gained power. When Assad's regime collapsed in November 2024, many Syrians – including Christians – welcomed the end of decades of dictatorship. After fourteen years of war, they hoped to build a new Syria – a country governed by law, respecting freedom and equality, and based on a modern democratic constitution.

However, hopes were soon shaken by the rapid rise of the Sunni Jihadist group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which took power shortly afterwards. This sparked fears, especially among Christians, about their future under extremist rule.

The Christian minority is spread all over the country with no geographical specificity, as for example the Kurds in the north west, the Alawites on the coast or the Druze in the south. At the same time, Christians normally refuse to take up arms to defend themselves. Today, many are prompted to ask the question: can Syria's small and shrinking Christian population survive?

Christianity has existed in Syria since the first century AD, earning the country the name "the cradle of Christianity". Early Syrian Christians were central to shaping Christian theology. For example, 1,700 years ago in 325 AD, 20 Syrian bishops out of a total of 325 bishops took part in the First Council of Nicaea, a small town south of present-day Istanbul.

During the Islamic era, Christians continued to practice their faith and held key cultural and government roles. Despite periods of persecution, Muslims and Christians mostly lived in harmony, sharing neighbourhoods, celebrations and everyday life. Although there were times when they suffered persecution and marginalisation, they were always steadfast in maintaining their faith.

But over the past decade, the Christian community has faced an existential



Maintaining hope, especially in times of uncertainty: Protestant Sunday service in Syria.

threat. Their numbers have fallen sharply – from about 1.5 million (10% of the population) before 2011 to just 2% today. This decline has been driven by poverty, lack of security and worsening living conditions, pushing many to leave the country.

Being the Church of Christ in Syria today is both a burden and a calling. It means holding on to not only a physical homeland, but also a spiritual promise – “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5).

In recent months, I’ve heard differing views on how to respond to these challenges in my conversations with churches and Christian community members.

Some prefer to withdraw from politics and focus on the Church as a safe space. They believe Christianity’s spiritual mission should remain separate from political struggles. For them, the Church should focus on caring for people’s spiritual and social needs, providing unity and protection during difficult times. Others – especially intellectuals – argue that Christians must take part in public life to protect their rights and their future. They warn that avoiding politics allows extremist groups to dominate. These voices call for cooperation with moderate Muslims and participation in democratic movements to promote a more inclusive and tolerant Syria. ►



Wietse Jongsma/Unsplash

**Maalula:** The inhabitants of this predominantly Christian village fell victim to Islamist terror and displacement during the civil war.

Looking at Syria today, it's clear that the country cannot stay as it is. Solving the crisis will need strong international support. The current president must cut ties with extremist factions and instead support the creation of a national army. Only then can Syrians – both majorities and minorities – come together under a modern, democratic constitution that is backed by international legitimacy. The big question remains: Is this future really possible?

*Reverend Joseph Kessab comes from Syria and has been President of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Church in Syria and Lebanon since 2017*

## Religions in Syria

Syria has a population of just under 24 million. Ethnically, around half of them are Arabs. The other half is composed of Kurds, Levantines, Assyrians, Turkmen and Armenian.

Almost 90% of the population is Muslim and about two-thirds of them Sunni Muslims. The rest follow Shi'ite forms of Islam, such as the Alawites or Ismailis. About 3% of the population are Druze.

Before 2011, roughly 10% were Christians of various denominations. Today, it is estimated that only 2% of all the people in Syria are Christians.

# Syria needs safety and growth

Everyone in the country longs for a prosperous future

At the end of 2024, Syria entered a new era in its history. Admittedly, there are enormous uncertainties. The country has embarked on the road to redefining itself, offering hope that the future may differ from past experiences that Syrians have lived.

Syria is undergoing a time of new beginnings despite its foundations being severely damaged. New challenges have emerged in the aftermath of the revolution's triumph. The infrastructure is destroyed. There is a lack of manpower and experience which has led to gaps that some exploit for personal gains. The most pressing concern for the Syrian population is safety. The absence of security discourages many Syrians from returning to the homeland or investing in business ventures. People feel vulnerable and unsafe.

The second challenge is Syria's devastated economic situation. The country requires time to rebuild after 14 years of continued war which has left widespread destruction inside the country. Progress is hindered by shortages at various basic levels such as electricity. In addition, damaged businesses, the lack of capital and manpower, make it difficult to take significant steps towards development and prosperity.

The economic crisis affects all Syrians, though there is considerable relief that the excessively high taxation imposed by the previous government, crippling Syria's economy, no longer exists. Many Syrians eagerly await tangible economic improve-

ments and the lifting of international sanctions. But resolving these issues will take time.

Regarding Syria's Christian population, it is important to remember that Christianity has been present in the country for nearly 2,000 years, existing uninterrupted throughout history. Although the composition and number of Christians have fluctuated over time, their presence has endured for over 2,000 years regardless of external pressures.

Today, Christians are actively contributing to Syria's reconstruction. Initiatives by churches and individuals alike demonstrate a commitment to prioritising the country's recovery. Syrian Christians have long played a role in Syria's development and renovation. That dedication remains unchanged today, as all Syrians – including Christians – aspire to a thriving Syria, where every individual enjoys a high quality of life.

*Assadour Mncherian is Pastor of the Armenian Evangelical church in Aleppo.*



Panoramic view of Aleppo's old town from the citadel

## “Fear is not exclusively a Christian phenomenon”

### Christian anxiety and the future of Syria

**Christians who are concerned that a strict interpretation of Sharia law could be imposed in the new Syria are not alone in their fears. Such a development would affect everyone who wants to live in a diverse cosmopolitan society. Syria has only one chance to heal if it is rebuilt as an inclusive state, says theologian Assaad Kattan.**

**I**n February 2011, a group of friends met at a conference in Aleppo. In the evening, they sat in a restaurant in the old town, drinking arak and singing songs in Arabic and Armenian. The Arab Spring had just begun in Tunisia and Egypt. But the mood in the capital of northern Syria gave no indication that this movement would also take hold in Syria. Some Aleppans thought it was just a “bread revolution”, as if poverty did not exist in Syr-

ia. But just one month later, uprisings broke out in Syria. At first, everything was peaceful and non-violent. It was the first revolution in human history to be triggered by children, as theologian Najeeb Awad wrote at the time. But one thing was clear from the outset: it was not just about bread, but primarily about freedom.

At that time, the attitude of Christians towards the revolution was no different from other Syrians. Some supported the uprisings and took part in them. Others were against it because they saw it as a threat to their economic or political interests. However, most Christians remained silent during the first few months, as did the majority of the Syrian population. Many believed it was a revolution of the rural population and marginalised cities such as Daraa and Idlib.



Craig Jenkins

This is not to say that Christians should not fear for their future. They have a legitimate fear of the Islamisation of society that seems to be looming on the horizon when certain events take place, such as a prime minister who preaches in the Umayyad Mosque, or high-ranking state officials who know only Sharia law as a legal system are appointed, or when hundreds of Alawites are massacred on the Syrian coast.

This fear leads to the evocation of historical wounds to justify current behaviour. Christians remember their history as dhimmis, i.e. protégés of Muslims, and project it onto the present. They see their future as protégés of foreign powers such as Russia or Iran. Or they reinforce an exaggerated fear of Sunni Muslims, even though they have shared the same air, land, bread, salt and culture with them for centuries.

But even this justified fear is neither an exclusively Christian phenomenon nor one that is limited to minorities. Rather, it is a fear held by all reasonable people that Syria will become a place where justice is denied and civil rights disappear in favour of a dictatorship of the majority.

The antidote to all this is the reconstruction of a state that acts inclusively, where all Syrian people are recognised as equal citizens. Everyone can identify with such a state. Only an inclusive state can promote the lengthy process of healing wounded memories and help the various components of society to develop their potential and redefine their roles.

*Assaad Elias Kattan is Professor of Orthodox Theology at the University of Münster.*

Christians had no more reason to fear than the rest of the Syrian people. It was fear of the Sidnaya prison model, which the Baath regime used to intimidate everyone in Syria. What's more, this regime succeeded in distorting the image of the Syrian revolution and, with the support of its allies in Lebanon, spreading the theory of a necessary "alliance of minorities". Several patriarchs, bishops and priests adopted the view that Alawites, Christians, Shi'ites, Druze and other so-called minorities should unite against the Sunni majority.

Later, this fear took on a dual nature: on the one hand, fear of the tyranny of the regime and on the other hand, fear of the Islamic State (IS) under which Muslims themselves suffered more than anyone else. So this was not a fear purely felt by Christians, but rather by society as a whole which was afraid of a violent Islamist model that revived the worst aspects of Sharia law and sought to impose it by force.

# “I began to dream aloud”

For a free Syria where everyone has the same rights

**There is no future for Syria’s minorities unless they are part of the future of the majority. But if extremist movements prevail, everyone will lose in the end and the opportunity that presents itself now will be lost forever.**

**I**t was December 8, 2024, and for the first time in my life, the streets of Homs were completely still. There was no gunfire in the distance, no presence of secret police watching our every move, no portraits of the Assad family staring down from every wall. Just silence – a heavy, strange silence that hung over the city like a fog. I stood at the door of our Reformed Presbyterian Church, my fingers clutching my Bible a little tighter than usual.

The regime – the one I had grown up under – was gone. The impossible had happened. It was as if the world I knew had simply dissolved before my eyes. For over fifty years, the Assad family had ruled Syria with an iron fist. We lived under their watchful eyes, always cautious with our words, careful with our movements. I had learned to lower my voice when politics came up in conversation, to look around before speaking. Now, the Assad regime’s grip had loosened, and the air felt different – uncertain, unpredictable.

Yet, as the days turned into weeks, the euphoria of freedom began to fade into a quiet sense of unease. The country I had known was gone, but what was coming in its place?

In our small church we didn’t celebrate with fanfare. We are part of one of

Syria’s smallest religious minorities. We continued doing what we have always done: serving, teaching, caring – regardless of religion or background. We have always believed that building a country is a shared responsibility, not the right of one group alone. We didn’t wait for permission to be part of Syria’s future. We have always belonged here – and now, our hope is stronger than ever.

## **It isn’t about liberation, it’s about domination**

But soon, another message began to drown out the hopeful ones. A new slogan started to appear – first whispered, then chanted, then spray-painted on walls by the rising power of HTS (Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham): “Whoever liberates, decides.” At first, it sounded like a declaration: those who paid the price would lead the rebuilding. But it quickly turned into something darker: a tool of exclusion, a warning to those who didn’t fit the mould. This wasn’t about liberation – it was about domination.

They said we were safe. And it’s true – we Christians have not yet faced direct attacks. But what does safety mean when kidnappings and killings happen every day, dismissed as “individual acts”? When people are punished for political views they never held, but simply because of the religion of the families they were born into? Safety begins to feel like luck. And luck always runs out.

The fall of the regime wasn’t like any revolution I had imagined. It wasn’t a battle. There were no final stands, no street-by-street fighting in the city of Homs or



Anyone who climbs onto the roof of the Presbyterian Church in Homs, as the artist of this painting did, looks at four places of worship in just one street: the church bell tower on the left, then a minaret and the cross of the Greek Catholic Church, and finally another minaret on the right.

even in Damascus. The soldiers simply... evaporated. Checkpoints were abandoned overnight, as if someone had decided it was time for the curtain to fall on this chapter of Syria's history.

### The unanswered questions

It was too orderly, too controlled. I could feel the weight of a larger hand behind it all – someone orchestrating the fall from afar. Who made this decision? Who was pulling the strings? The withdrawal of

forces was too precise, too synchronised. Was it a reaction to the revolution or was there a secret handover? I don't know but what I am sure about is that someone in distant capitals had planned this. Syria, it seemed, was merely the stage for their carefully written script.

Yet something inside me changed when the regime fell. For the first time in my life, I could speak freely – without looking over my shoulder, without edit-



Dosselman/unsplash

At the market in Homs

ing my thoughts. I could name things for what they were. That freedom, fragile as it is, awakened something powerful in me.

But freedom is not guaranteed. As religious extremism grows louder, I wonder how long diverse voices will be tolerated. Will those who once resisted tyranny now silence dissent in the name of purity? Can Syria truly be reborn if the new power speaks in absolutes?

### The dream of a new Syria

I had spent years holding my tongue, carefully navigating the complex political landscape. But now, in the silence of my study or the stillness of a Sunday service, I began to speak. I began to dream aloud. I dream of a Syria that remains safe and developed, a country that embraces all its people.

*I have a dream...* that Syria becomes a land of peace, with no place for violence or weapons.

*I have a dream...* that sectarianism disappears and the walls of hatred fall – replaced by mutual respect among all religions and beliefs.

*I have a dream...* that Jews, Christians, Muslims, atheists, and non-religious people live side by side, equal in rights, equal in opportunities, united in dignity.

*I have a dream...* that Syrians alone decide their future – not foreign agents, not the tools of greedy powers.

*I have a dream...* that everyone understands: there is no future for minorities unless they are part of the future of the majority. No group will be saved without the others. Our fate is shared – and we will either build our future together, or lose it all together.

*Adon Naaman is pastor of the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Homs.*

# When ideology triumphs over education

A nuanced view of developments in Syria

**Thirteen years ago, Reverend Jacob Sabbagh had his own personal experience with those who are now in power. He was kidnapped by Islamist rebels in Idlib. His balanced view of Syria's future today is linked to this experience.**

**J**acoub Sabbagh has a rare gift. He can rationalise his personal experience and see the bigger picture of developments in society. When he talks about his kidnapping in September 2012, he does not dramatise anything. Yet what happened back then in a house in the country somewhere near Idlib could have cost him his life. He was on his way back to the village where he had been transferred just a few months earlier. His parish also included the small Protestant community that still existed in Idlib at the time. Sabbagh had been called to a dying man there and now wanted to get back as quickly as possible. He knew that the Syrian army was in the process of withdrawing from the area around Idlib and would leave the field free to the Islamist rebels.

Jacoub Sabbagh originally comes from al-Hasaka in the north-east of the country. Idlib is located in the north-west where the young priest simply did not know his way around. "I got lost and didn't know how to get to the motorway heading south," he recounts. At some point, he reached a checkpoint but it was already controlled by the rebels. Three men got into his car and ordered him to drive to the next village.

When they arrived at a house in the countryside, they tied him up, blindfolded him and led him into the windowless bathroom of the house. He remained there for several hours and had to listen to another man in the next room who was

Jacoub Sabbagh



Church service in Fairuzeh, Jacob Sabbagh's congregation.

being interrogated and accused of terrible things. His asthma was causing him problems. He was in danger of losing consciousness and asked his captors to be taken to another room.

During the interrogation, he sat opposite men with long beards, apparently religious fanatics. While searching his laptop, they had come across documents about

radical Islamist groups and their ideology. He was interested in what such people really believed. But his kidnappers suspected that he wanted to incite Christians against the rebels. They refused to believe that he was only a priest. Sabbagh knew that his life was in danger. But instead of begging for mercy, he became angry.

“I asked one of the men what he had been doing before the revolution. He was a bus driver and had left school after eighth grade. And I have two university degrees! I was so angry that someone like him, with no education, was suddenly allowed to decide what was right and wrong in my life,” he says.

The fact that Sabbagh was so angered by his kidnapper’s lack of education can be described as a typical trait of an Evangelical pastor in the Middle East. The idea of education is embedded in the DNA of the Presbyterian Synod Church which runs twenty general education schools in Syria and Lebanon. Hundreds of Christian and Muslim children and young adults are taught there to a high standard free from ideology. In this way, the approximately 4,000 Protestants, who are a minority within a minority in the region, make an important contribution to peaceful coexistence in society.

But when ideology triumphs over education and the question of power arises, violence quickly ensues, leading to situa-

tions such as those experienced by Jacobou Sabbagh in 2012. He was fortunate. His kidnappers could find out nothing about him other than that he had indeed only visited a dying man. They gave him back his belongings and sent him away.

But what good is freedom when you don’t know your way around? Sabbagh drove his car to a Syrian army checkpoint. Instead of helping him, they shot at him. They suspected him of being a suicide bomber. A bullet missed him by a hair’s breadth. Eventually, he found the motorway exit for Homs.

For Jacobou Sabbagh, the fact that Syria was able to descend into chaos so quick-

Ali Wassouf/unsplash





**Peaceful coexistence is possible: in the coastal city of Tartus, the Maronite St. Elias Church and the Al-Mounira Mosque stand next to each other.**

was repeatedly emphasised that he was not a true Muslim.”

But when two factions within the same religion argue about orthodoxy, it eventually affects other religious communities. The Christians in Syria found themselves caught between the fronts.

“All religions have a common problem – they always want to define what is right or wrong and what leads to heaven or hell,” says Sabbagh. “You can get along well with other religions if you acknowledge that they are also seeking God and want to serve him. But as soon as it comes to truth or the right doctrine, you distance yourself and insist on being right. Then at some point in time, you end up fighting each other.”

In Syria, the question of religious identity has gradually gained in importance over time. And when identity is based on separation from others, tolerance no longer has a chance. “In the Middle East, it is important which family, clan and religious community you belong to. In Europe, on the other hand, it doesn’t matter whether someone is Catholic or Protestant. You can contemplate the future together. What matters to us, on the other hand, is where someone comes from. Our gaze is directed towards the past.”

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

ly and so massively is not something that simply fell from the sky or came out of hell, but has various reasons. Education is one issue. When that is lacking, ideology falls on fertile ground. Until the 1960s, there were no extremists among Sunni Muslims, who make up about two-thirds of the Syrian population. It was only after the military coup in 1970, when Hafez al-Assad, who comes from the Shi’ite Alawite minority, secured absolute power and gradually brought the population under his control, that the question of religious affiliation was raised, says Sabbagh. “At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt became increasingly radical and began to influence the Sunni Muslims in Syria. In order to weaken Assad, it

## When an overgrown garden is cleared again

Everyday observations and the question of the future of Christians in Syria

"No Christians are being persecuted in Syria, nor have they ever been," says Gabriele Hamzé who has lived with her husband Shafiq in his home town of Soueida for decades. Nevertheless, the future of Christians in Syria is at stake, even though the first general signs of improvement can be seen.

Gabriele and Shafiq Hamzé represent what Syria once stood for: openness to the world, interreligious dialogue and a sense of culture and education. Originally from Munich, she is Catholic and worked at the German Archaeological Institute in Damascus until she retired. He is Druze, comes from Soueida in southern Syria and worked as an engineer in the oil industry. Before the war, they enjoyed inviting people engaged in culture and the arts to their large house in the country in Era near Soueida. For young people, they had set up an environmental centre that focused on nature conservation and other ecological issues.

Then came the war and it radically changed their lives. Their country house was looted and destroyed; Shafiq was kidnapped. Fortunately, he was able to free himself. But not a single one of the thousands of trees they had once planted survived.

Today, the retired couple lives in a rented three-room flat in Soueida and they commute regularly to Munich. Until now,

Gabriele and Shafiq Hamzé have been commuting between Munich and Soueida for many years.

At the end of March, they were finally able to fly directly from Damascus to Germany again.



they had to take the arduous, expensive and unsafe route through Lebanon. But all of a sudden, the trip has now become very easy. A few weeks ago, flights resumed from Damascus to Germany and it is only an hour's drive from Soueida to Damascus. Most of the checkpoints that used to make travelling inside Syria endlessly complicated have disappeared.

In a lot of places, the rubbish that had been littering the landscape for years has been cleared away, says Gabriele Hamzé, who is just as happy when a neglected garden in her neighbourhood is suddenly cleared again. "And the security forces we've come across in the last few weeks have all been very friendly." It is these little observations in everyday life that give her hope that Syria has a better future ahead of it despite all the uncertainties.



Katja Dorothea Buck

She believes that interim president Ahmed al-Scharaa, the former Islamist leader, does not want to establish a Sharia state.

Admittedly, the economic situation remains a disaster. The country has been systematically destroyed over the years. "There are massive energy and power shortages," she says. In February, there was no power in Soueida for five days in a row, despite temperatures of around zero degrees! She is very concerned that climate change is also having a noticeable impact on the fertile area around Soueida. "There has been virtually no rain this winter," she says.

And then there is the question of Syria's future. The neighbouring country of Israel has prepared plans for southern Syria and has promised the Druze majority

there privileged forms of cooperation. "In Damascus, we've heard many times that all Druze are supposedly very pro-Israel and that the south will eventually secede.

I can't imagine that at all," says Gabriele Hamzé. She says the Druze position is far from being a united front as it is portrayed.

When asked about the situation of Christians, she speaks very clearly. "Christians have never been persecuted in Syria." On the contrary, the Assad regime even gave this minority privileges and protected them. "It always made me mad when the priest in our neighbourhood prayed for President Assad during mass and praised him in the highest terms. A church simply can't do that." Of course, there have always been cases where Christians have been in trouble. But often the reason behind this was a dispute between neighbours.

Nevertheless, the Christian population has dwindled from 10% in 2011 to just 1% today. Gabriele Hamzé is well aware of this. "I don't blame anyone who has left Syria because of the overall situation. But to do so on the grounds of religious persecution is not right." What concerns her most is the question of the future of the Christian presence. What would Syria be without Christians? "The Syrians were the first non-Jewish Christians in the history of Christianity. If there were no Christians left in Syria, something essential would be missing. Syria would lose part of its identity," she says.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## “Schneller shaped every aspect of my life”

**Long-standing director George Haddad looks back**

Rev. George Haddad was director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Khirbet Kanafar, Lebanon, from 2006 till 2024. He retired last autumn. His work focussed on providing children with a happy childhood and preparing them for a successful future.

*You served the JLSS as director for 18 years. What was your vision for the Johann Ludwig Schneller School when you started?*

My vision was to restore JLSS to its former glory in serving disadvantaged children. My goal was to keep this wonderful ministry going towards a successful future that will enable the school to help others as it helped me as a child and a young adult. My concern was for the boarding children and their facilities which were in a very bad state of repair. I wanted to modernize them and the teaching methods. I wanted to bring modern technology to the vocational program. My vision was to make sure every child would receive the best care, education, and vocational training in a friendly and relaxed environment that would prepare her/him for a successful future while at the same time enjoying the happy childhood, she/he deserves.

*What was the toughest time during your directorate?*



Katja Dorothea Buck

There were many tough times, after all I was director for 18 years. I cannot even begin to list them. These details are better left untold.

*What influenced you most during your time as director?*

My family goes back many generations with the amazing Schneller ministry. Intricate details of the daily life of three generations who lived, studied, and worked in the Syrian Orphanage made its history our daily bread. The great honor of being part of this historic charity, and my vision for our children were the two main drives behind my work.

*Is there something that you have learned from the students?*

I made it clear to students that they are part of the brainstorming approach we use to find solutions to problems. The idea of any child was not ridiculed by an educator, trainer, teacher, or classmate.

Children helped me shape JLSS from the minutest detail of the food they like, to decisions regarding their education, to projects I needed to implement. All were a direct result of what I learnt from children.

*Are there students you will never forget?*

A young boy provided me with information that helped avoid a major catastrophe when the boiler exploded in the vocational house. We were trying to put the raging fire out when I noticed that the diesel pipe was broken. Diesel was pouring into the fire. We needed to reach the broken pipe inside the boiler room to shut the valve. The situation was desperate and extremely dangerous. A very young boy ran to me and said: "There is a shut-off valve

outside the building." I told him I don't remember seeing one there. He said: "You can't see it because there is no handle." We ran outside and sure enough there was the valve. We needed a tool to turn the valve. The same boy ran to the main kitchen nearby and came back with pliers which I used to shut the valve. With his timely assistance, we were able to avoid a much worse disaster.

*How would you describe the role of Schneller in your personal life?*

Schneller School and the legacy of the Syrian Orphanage shaped every aspect of my life, from my faith, personality, liberal free spirit, strict discipline, punctuality, sense of justice, abhorrence



Not only were the sporting successes of the children and young adults a delight for George Haddad



JLSS

Passing on good traditions was important to George Haddad.

to racism, tolerance, love of music, vocational skills, stubbornness in doing what is right, dreaming big, never stopping at obstacles, knowing that you can learn anything if you put your head to it, and even my Christian calling.

*What are your wishes for JLSS for the future?*

I wish the JLSS board and partners would accept the change in boarding care I recommended many years ago. Only 20 to 30% of boarding students need to sleep at JLSS. The rest should be taken home by school buses in the evening at various hours based on age groups, after doing their studies and receiving the care they need. The emotional support the home provides cannot be replicated.

*Katja Dorothea Buck  
conducted the interview.*

## “Music for Peace”

Farewell concert for George Haddad at the JLSS

The farewell concert for George Haddad was originally scheduled to take place at the end of September 2024. However, these plans were thwarted by the war that Israel waged against Hezbollah in Lebanon. The concert finally took place at the end of May 2025. The two musicians Klaus Schulten and Sisu Lustig put together a programme under the motto “Music for Peace” that was both colourful and at the same time profound.

Sounds that were probably unfamiliar rang out over the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon at the foot of the Shouf Mountains Strozzi, Bach, Schütz, Schubert, Mozart and Purcell. Klaus Schulten sat at the organ, having discussed the idea of “Music for Peace” with George Haddad on numerous occasions over the past few years. This time, he was able to win over the contralto Sisu Lustig from Stuttgart to join him in Lebanon for the occasion.

The church was filled to capacity. Even though many of the children and young adults were perhaps attending such a concert for the very first time, they listened very attentively as Sisu Lustig sang the first piece by Barbara Strozzi, a work that expresses in music the flowing tears of a grieving person.

The pieces were interspersed with cultural bridges, for example, the students contributed to “Music for Peace” and sang their own songs just as fervently and loud-



Kerstin Sommer [M]

**Music for Peace with Sisu Lustig and organist Klaus Schulten.** The organ was salvaged from a dilapidated church in the Scottish Highlands and its sound has been echoing at the JLSS since 2018.

ly: “Salaam – salaam”. Peace. This is what everyone is yearning for, especially in a region where rockets fell only six months previously and where strict travel warnings still remain in place.

Then a very special guest arrived. He entered the church quietly and took his seat unassumingly: Reverend George Haddad, the guest of honour and long-standing director of the institution. Right up to the last minute, it was uncertain whether he would actually be able to make the long journey to the JLSS. But now he was there, and at last it was possible to pay him an official tribute once again in front of the school’s administrative board, staff and students. He was presented with an engraved medal by the EVS in recognition of his services. Everyone in the church gave him a long, thunderous round of applause.

Ms. Odette Haddad Makhoul, the new Director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS), then invited everyone to a reception with tables laden with Lebanese delicacies. And so the day came to a cheerful end. There was plenty of laughter; the entire clergy from the village was present: Roman Catholic (Melkite), Protestant Reformed and Baptist, as well as the deputy ambassador and cultural attaché from the German Embassy. A constant theme expressed during conversations was the hope that peace might finally prevail. But George Haddad (who is not one for big words) had already left – as quietly and unassuming as he had arrived.

Sisu Lustig and Klaus Schulten repeated the concert programme the following day, Ascension Day, at the National Evangelical Church in Beirut. Once again, it became clear how much music connects people. It can build bridges between countries and cultures because it can express the entire spectrum of human emotions: from deepest sorrow to jubilant joy. “We listen to music not only with our ears, but also with our hearts,” said NECB Senior Pastor Habib Badr, placing Psalm 85 at the centre of this peace concert. The psalm says: “Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.”

*Uwe Gräbe*

## Securing the future as best as possible

**A glimpse into the work of the Administrative Board of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School**

**Institutions such as the Schneller schools, which feel responsible for the well-being and future of children, must be particularly cautious in times of crisis. This requires structures and trustworthy relationships. At the end of May, the Administrative Board of the Johann-Ludwig-Schneller School (JLSS) confirmed some important decisions.**

**A**fter the ceasefire that came into effect at the end of November 2024, work at the JLSS continues to be fraught with uncertainty. A break-in at the new carpentry workshop at the end of last year (as reported in Schneller Magazine) has now led to consequences. The Director, Odette Haddad Makhoul, has had the institution extensively secured with new security doors and additional surveillance cameras in the outdoor area. The Administrative Board expressed its appreciation for these measures at the end of May.

The Administrative Board also expressed its appreciation for her prudent actions during the most intense phase of the last war in October last year. By maintaining constant dialogue with all parties in the region and by evacuating the school for only one month, the JLSS was able to remain open for its target group – children and young adults mainly from poor families and difficult backgrounds – and avoid being occupied by squatters.

The institution continues to operate well above its actual capacity with 316 stu-

dents, 133 of whom are boarders. However, children and young adults in need cannot simply be turned away!

Following the inauguration of the new Lebanese government, officials are now expected to announce a significant increase in salaries for teachers in Lebanon. The JLSS Administrative Board discussed a series of measures to compensate for the financial deficit that is likely to result from this.

A significant step forward has finally been achieved in a matter that has been on the back burner for decades: several plots of land belonging to the JLSS were acquired in 1952 by handshake alone and were never officially registered. The registration process, which has become more difficult with each passing year, has probably preoccupied generations of EVS Executive Boards and JLSS Administrative Boards. Recently, the families of some of the former owners even asserted their claims on the Schneller site. Amid political upheaval (and temporary favourable exchange rates for court and legal fees), the lawyer was able to secure a significant portion of the land. Of the 17 plots in question, 12 have now been officially registered; a further 5 plots have been protected from third-party access, at least temporarily, so that final registration can now be expected in the not too distant future.

*Uwe Gräbe*

## Big ceremony for boarding home inauguration

**Amman (EVS).** The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg and the generosity of numerous donors have provided almost a million euros to fully refurbish the boarding home at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Jordan for the first time since 1960. The school's director, Khaled Freij, has been a driving force behind this project. On 31 May, a grand opening ceremony was held in the presence of the Anglican Archbishop, the ambassadors of Germany and the United Kingdom, and a small delegation from the EVS and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg. The rooms flooded with light, the sturdy beds and wardrobes for each child, the practical kitchens and the cosy common rooms – everything was very impressive and, above all, had been planned by everyone involved and in accordance with all child protection requirements.

EVS/Sommer>>



**A mixed delegation from Jerusalem, Jordan and Germany attended the inauguration of the refurbished boarding home at the TSS.**

A path on the grounds was renamed “Helmut Ernst Alley” in honour of a particularly generous donor. This year's vocational training graduates received their certificates and the Royal Jordanian Medal of Independence, which had been awarded to the TSS shortly before, was presented to the public for the first time.

The school choir conducted by Qamar Badwan performed a rich repertoire and the TSS kitchen and bakery conjured up a huge variety of delicacies. To ensure that the children at the boarding home also have time to learn German, they received a small gift from the EVS: a “word clock” which allows them to tell the time in German.

## High Award for the Theodor Schneller

**Amman (TSS).** The news came like a bolt out of the blue. On 25 May, the 79th Independence Day of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Director of the Theodor

Schneller School (TSS), Khaled Freij, received the Royal Jordanian Medal of Independence First Class from King Abdullah II. The award was in

from difficult backgrounds, particularly in vocational training and at the boarding home.

Freij told the Petra News Agency: “This award is an honour, a confirmation of our responsibility and a mark of great appreciation for everything we have been doing at TSS since 1959.” The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools and the EMS are proud of this outstanding recognition and heartily congratulate our friends in Jordan.



recognition of the exceptional work of the Schneller School with young adults

TSS

## Change of staff at the EVS-offices

**Stuttgart (EVS).** There has been a change of staff at the EVS offices in Stuttgart. After two and a half years, Joscha Quade has handed over his administrative duties for the Association to Leonhard Ayasse. "The EVS is a wonderful association with committed members and a very active Executive Board. I have really enjoyed supporting the Association's work, whether by organising events, dealing with members' concerns or contributing to the Schneller magazine," says Joscha Quade. Quade



EMS

**Leonhard Ayasse is delighted with all the exciting insights he has already gained in his first few weeks at the EVS offices.**



EVS

**At the Kirchentag in Hanover: Joscha Quade at the EVS stand together with Susanne and Anselm Kreh from the Schneller Association, and with EMSO, the blue elephant.**

adds that the Association is a reliable partner and a sign of hope and solidarity with the people in the Middle East through its continuous support for schools, especially in times of crisis. He is moving to a new position within the EMS.

His successor, Leonhard Ayasse, started in his new position on 1 April and is looking forward to the tasks ahead. "In this short time, I have already gained many valuable insights. I particularly enjoy working on the editorial team of the Schneller magazine." Leonhard Ayasse studied philosophy at the University of Tübingen, but has always been interested in events in the Middle East. The position now offers him the opportunity to support the Association in making a positive contribution to the future of the region, Ayasse said. He sees his philosophical background as an advantage helping him to understand the complex interrelationships in the region. The Middle East in particular, where narratives and biographies often clash, requires a person to take a holistic view in an attempt to identify moments of accord despite all the differences.

We intend to celebrate the change once again at the General Meeting in October.

## Kirchentag: Celebrities at the “Schneller Talk”

**Hannover (EVS).** The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) once again participated in this year's Kirchentag (Church Congress) with a stand at the Market of Opportunities. Over a cup of Arabic coffee or mint tea, visitors were able to talk to Association members and learn about the ministry of the Schneller schools and the present situation in Lebanon and Jordan.



Interesting discussion partners came to the EVS stand for the so-called Schneller Talk. Among them, Bishop Prof. Dr. Heike Springhart (Baden), Bishop Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl (Württemberg), Sabine Foth (President of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wuettemberg) and Prof. Dr. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm (Chairman of the Central Committee of the Ecumenical Council of Churches) were present and answered questions about what makes their hearts beat faster for Schneller.

Sally Azar, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, came from Jerusalem and gave a first-hand account of the current situation of Christians in Israel and Palestine. Johanna Leidel, a recent volunteer returning from the Theodor Schneller School in Jordan, also reported on her experiences in everyday life at the school and the boarding home.

The EVS stand attracted particular attention when Federal President Frank-

Walter Steinmeier sat down for a cup of Arabic coffee, inquired about the ministry of the schools and engaged in conversation with the people there.

The themes running through all the discussions at the Schneller Talk were em-



A cup of Arabic coffee for Federal President Steinmeier. This was followed by a lively discussion about the Schneller schools.

pathy for one another, staying in contact, building bridges and promoting dialogue.

On the whole, there was a great deal of interest in the ministry, with very intensive discussions and great appreciation for the ministry being done at the two schools.

*Kerstin Sommer, EVS-Chair*

# Because people believe in life

## Appeal for donations for the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza

**Before the war, there were 36 hospitals in Gaza. Now, two-thirds of them are no longer operational. The Ahli Arab Hospital is the only one run by a church. It has been bombed three times and severely damaged, but somehow, it always continues to stay running. Now, some of its work is taking place in tents.**

Since 7 October 2023, “Gaza” has become a code word – a code word for death and destruction, for brutality and cynicism, for senseless terror and unimaginable suffering. The people in Gaza – Palestinians, international aid workers and Israeli hostages – have to live in conditions that none of us can even contemplate. But what we do know and must not forget is this: people LIVE in Gaza. And where people live, humanity is always possible. The Ahli Arab Hospital is a prime example of this.

Founded in 1882 in Zeitoun, a southern district of Gaza City, it is one of the oldest healthcare facilities in the coastal strip. The fact that it is also referred to in the media as the “Baptist Hospital” is linked to its history. The ministry was started by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Anglican Church. In 1954, the Southern Baptist Convention acquired the hospital but returned it to the CMS in the early 1980s. The CMS eventually handed it over to the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, which also runs the Theodor Schneller School in Amman.

As the only Christian hospital in the Gaza Strip, it symbolises the enduring legacy of the Christian community in Gaza,

with its history spanning millennia. However, there are now very few Christians left in Gaza. Their number is estimated at around 600. Most of them are Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic.

Since the beginning of the war, the Ahli Arab Hospital has been severely damaged three times by shells and missiles. On 14 October 2023, an Israeli missile struck the two upper floors, destroying the cancer diagnosis centre. Four of the staff were injured.

The hospital was hit even harder just three days later. An explosion in the courtyard killed or injured hundreds of people who had sought shelter there. The exact number of dead and injured still remains unclear with estimates ranging from 100 to 500. The Anglican Diocese in Jerusalem reported 200 dead.

It has also not been conclusively determined who was responsible for this catastrophic attack. The secret services of Israel, the USA, France, Great Britain and Canada claim to have evidence that it was a misguided rocket fired at Israel by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Media outlets such as the New York Times and Le Monde, as well as human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Forensic Architecture, claim to have evidence pointing to an Israeli air strike. The Ahli Arab Hospital has thus become a symbol for the battle of narratives.

If we focus less on the question of blame and turn our attention to the people, the Ahli Arab Hospital becomes a sym-



As the hospital buildings have been largely destroyed, patients are now being treated in tents (left).

bol of something totally different. It is an expression of how people still believe in life despite all the death and destruction surrounding them. The hospital continues to provide services to the injured and sick with whatever means it has at its disposal. Doctors and nurses – regardless of their religion – have chosen their profession to help people in need.

On 13 April 2025, the Ahli Arab Hospital was bombed again. The emergency room was destroyed. The Israeli military had warned the hospital management shortly before so that all patients and staff could be evacuated. Nevertheless, one child died during the evacuation.

Despite everything, the Ahli Arab Hospital continues to provide medical services as best it can. “Every day, 24 operations are performed and hundreds of injured and sick people are treated,” wrote the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, Hosam Naoum, on 22 May. He added that a large

tent had been erected in the courtyard to replace the destroyed buildings, where patients can now be treated. “We thank God for the work and mission of this hospital and for all our supporters around the world,” he continues, adding a verse from the Gospel of Matthew: “And Jesus said, ‘I was sick and you took care of me,’” (Matthew 25:36).

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## Donate to the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza

Support the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza by making use of the donation account of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS). The Anglican Diocese in Jerusalem is a member of the EMS

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## Letters to the editor

The last issue of Schneller magazine dealt with the importance of the Christian voice in the Middle East in impressive and diverse articles. However, one voice was missing: the voice for Gaza.

I see this as a warning and an obligation, not least for our church in Württemberg. The real challenge is that whoever raises their Christian voice 'for Israel' (whatever that means) should not forget the Christian voice 'for Gaza': seeing the people, all of the people there. Failing to point this out would not do justice to our Gospel and our faith.

But one person did exactly that: Pope Francis. During my time as organist at the Lutheran church in Rome, I once had the honour of playing for him during a service there. In real life, he was just as he always appeared to be: open to everyone. Now his Easter address, which were his last words so to speak, were for me like a continuation of this issue of the Schneller magazine that allows the truly Christian voice to be heard. „At the same time, my thoughts are with the people and especially with the Christian community in Gaza, where the terrible conflict continues to bring death and

destruction and is causing a dramatic and unworthy humanitarian situation. I appeal to the warring parties to cease fire, release hostages and help the people who are hungry and longing for a peaceful future!“

The Christian message is political. It combats all fundamentalist and racist madness, regardless of where it comes from.

*Klaus Schulten, Moos*

After reading through the latest issue of the Schneller magazine, I would like to once again congratulate you and express my appreciation. The way you engage your readers with original articles in the current situation of Christians in the Middle East – in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Iraq – is compelling, thought-provoking and very poignant. I feel a lot of fear and despair, but also tentative glimmers of hope. Despite all the problems, the Schneller schools are continuing to work hard to remain oases of peace and to build a future for the children and young adults, regardless of all the difficulties they are facing.

*Prof. Dr Johannes Lähnemann, Goslar*

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*For surely I know the plans I have for you,  
says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm,  
to give you a future with hope.*

Jeremiah 29:11



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