

# SCHNELLER

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EVS Evangelical Association  
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## Plea for diversity

Combating the extinction of the cultural heritage in the Middle East

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Cover photo: Two students at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman (EMS/Gräbe)  
Back cover: A teacher at the Theodor Schneller School helps to make the buildings more colourful. (EMS/Gräbe)

Dear Reader,

Just take a look at your garden – it is plain to see that the Creator likes diversity. And if you take a closer look at the people around you, you have to admit that each person is a little bit different – or, to say it in a positive way, unique. On the other hand, we are witnessing the worldwide extinction of cultural heritage in the 21st century. The Middle East, a region with one of the greatest cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in the world, is a sad example of this. Minorities are rapidly diminishing under ever increasing pressure. So, when we were planning this issue, we decided to look into the question of minorities and diversity.



One of the contributors is the Lebanese doctor and politician Fuad Abou Nader, who explains why he sees Christians in Lebanon as the stabilising factor par excellence in the crisis-ridden country. John Munayer from Jerusalem explains why Arab Christians do not like to be called a minority, even if they are few in number. And the French journalist, Marie-Armelle Beaulieu, who has been living in Jerusalem for over 30 years, has written an ode to religious diversity in the Holy City. Finally, we review an exciting, highly topical book by the liberation theologians of Sabeel on the subject of anti-Semitism in Palestine.

In the middle of May, the new Bishop of Württemberg, Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl, visited both Schneller schools. Of course, we include an article on this. And then Lisa Schnotz from the board of the Schneller Association asked a young man who recently graduated from the Theodor Schneller School in Amman how he enjoyed his time at the boarding home. As usual, you will find a lot of new and exciting news in this issue.

On behalf of the editorial team, I wish you a thought-provoking, informative and stimulating read. We would appreciate any feedback you may have.

Best regards

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

Katja Dorothea Buck

## Respecting and promoting diversity

It was a breathtaking moment: the children sang and played music with all their hearts. The young music teacher at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman has a special gift for getting children and young people to express their musical talents. Whether it was a solo song or the rhythmic accompaniment of a chorus or a piece of classical music, all the participants were highly focused and at the same time cheerful, so that the audience spontaneously clapped along.

I experienced this a few weeks ago during the award of certificates at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman, when Archbishop Hosam Naoum and Director Khalid Freij presented the graduates with their certificates and the choir performed several times during the interludes. It didn't matter that one boy was sitting in a wheelchair or another had to be carried onto the stage with his chair or that a girl could only move her hand to a limited extent. Everyone took part with their eyes beaming and no one was excluded. It was a great, colourful diversity by inclusion. And it was very noticeable that this is a slogan of the two Schneller schools in Lebanon and Jordan – promote diversity!

At the Johann Ludwig Schneller in Lebanon, it was also impressive to see how committed the students were to school life and how proud they were of the inau-



guration of the new electrical workshop which Director Rev. George Haddad, Rev. Dr Habib Bad, and I attended.

Promoting diversity starts with religious and cultural coexistence. The Schneller schools admit Christian and Muslim children from disadvantaged families and give them excellent opportunities for schooling and education. Diversity is experienced through everyday interaction. Even during devotions, it is essential to involve everyone, regardless of their religious convictions.

It is precisely by encouraging diversity that education for peace and understanding can be achieved. This is practised and exemplified in the Schneller schools. Regardless of where the children and young people come from and what ethnic, re-



Cheerful and concentrated: the choir of the Theodor Schneller School at the ceremony for the handing out of certificates.

religious or family background they have, everyone is welcome and valued. And they are encouraged to respect others.

For me, this is also nourished by the trust expressed in the bible quote of the year 2023: "You are the God who sees me." (Gen 16:13). It is the individual that counts and that is perceived at the Schneller School. When challenges occur, individual solutions and support options are explored. No one is overlooked or forgotten. This empowers the students and makes them feel the spirit of Christian compassion. Diversity is promoted and practised precisely because it is the individual that counts, with all the unique characteristics that this involves.

This learning and living community has left a huge impression on me. Over the years, even decades, these schools have existed as a place where children and young people learn to meet each other in peace and respect, and to respect cultural and religious diversity. This is a great treasure that needs to be preserved and promoted in the future – and serves as a model from which we can also learn how to promote diversity in our society.

*Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl is Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg and visited the two Schneller schools in Lebanon*



No matter where you come from. The main thing is to feel valued and welcome.

# Bringing more peace, humaneness and colour into the world

A plea for diversity

Minorities are under pressure in many countries. Frequently, cultural, religious or ethnic diversity is perceived as the primary source of conflict. But are homogeneous societies really more peaceful? What would be missing if there were no more minorities? Or, to put it differently, what added value do minorities bring to a society?

Let me start with a personal observation. I have been working on the topic of Christians in the Middle East for over 20 years. My interest in this subject is always met with amazement and incredulity. Why this small minority in such a complicated region? People would probably be more likely to understand me if I were interested in the welfare of an endangered seal colony in the North Sea. The protection of species of flora and fauna is regarded as an honourable calling. But what about “protecting diversity” when it comes to people who believe differently, live differently or have a different world view than the majority society? Why should we stand up for them?

It could be argued that a minority, such as the Christians in the Middle East, have always had their homes there and therefore have a historical claim to remain in their homeland in future. However, this is by no means a guarantee that they can remain. There are many examples of cultures and religions that have disappeared,



such as the Jews in Iraq who represented 2.7 per cent of the total population in 1947. Today there is hardly a single Jew left in Iraq. After the State of Israel was founded in 1948, during which 750,000 Palestinians were dispossessed and forcibly expelled, life was made so difficult for the Jews in Iraq and other Arab countries that they preferred to emigrate to Israel rather than stay in their homeland.

Another argument could be human rights. Everyone will probably agree that all people everywhere in the world should be “born free and equal in dignity and rights”, “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”, that everyone has “the right to life, liberty and security of person”, and so on. However, what the United Nations declared to be universally valid in a charter in 1945 after two devastating world wars is ignored with brutal violence every day in many parts of this world. Human rights



Franz Bachinger auf Pixabay

are violated far too often without the perpetrators having to fear any consequences. In many cases, minorities are affected particularly hard by human rights violations.

Another argument is that minorities, such as Christians in the Middle East, have proven themselves time and again to be good bridge builders between different (Muslim) groups and are therefore indispensable to society. There are countless examples of this argument, not only on the Christian side. After all, it may be crucial for minorities to get along with the majority society if they are to survive. They can hardly afford to use extremist rhetoric. On the other hand, reconciliation helps everyone. But all the efforts of bridge-building have not been able to prevent Christians in the Middle East from dwindling in numbers. The dividing forces that rely on isolation and exclusion are obviously much more powerful than those who work for reconciliation and harmony.

Are there any other arguments why minorities are important for a society? Perhaps their added value lies precisely in their otherness. By their very presence, they challenge the majority to come to terms with the fact that there are people who believe differently, live differently and explain the world in different ways. Certainly, there are many times that this has gone horribly wrong during the course of history. What was different was violently attacked or brutally wiped out.

But where difference is not seen as a threat but as something natural, people start to think about themselves. They ask questions about common human values, they evolve beyond their self-imposed limitations and the world becomes more colourful and beautiful. Minorities can make societies more humane and peaceful, provided people are willing to endure and deal with differences. This can and must be encouraged. Not only in the Middle East.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## “Christians are the bonding force in this country”

The unresolved issue of power and joint projects in Lebanon

**Freedom and equality are values that Christians in Lebanon have always advocated. Not only for themselves, but also for everyone else. They guarantee a culture of acceptance, says Lebanese politician Fouad Abou Nader, who fought alongside the Forces Libanaises during the war in Lebanon (1975-1989) and today heads a non-governmental organisation that promotes religious and ethnic diversity.**

*In 1989, Pope John Paul II said: “Lebanon is not just a country. It is also a message of freedom and a model of pluralism for the Orient and for the Occident.” Today, Lebanon is stuck in a crisis that could not get any worse. Quite a few point their finger at confessionalism as the main reason for all the misery. What is your view?*

Before I go into that, I would first like to clarify the special nature of Lebanon. It is a country with high mountains where persecuted Christians used to retreat to

find shelter. Other persecuted minorities joined them and were taken in. This is how Lebanon became a melting pot.

*What role do Christians play in Lebanon today?*

Christians are still the soul of the country. They stand for freedom and equality. In the past, they fled to the mountains and lived in caves to preserve their freedom. They also developed a spirit of education early on. As long as 300 years ago, church leaders decided that Christian children should receive an education. And finally, the Christians made Arabic the common language, even though they spoke Aramaic or Syriac at the time.

*Why is that important?*

It allowed them to play a leading role in the Arab Renaissance (Nahda) 150 years ago. That was a time of intellectual blossoming throughout the entire Arab world, a movement of modernisation that en-

### About ...

**Dr Fouad Abou Nader** (born 1956) is a doctor, politician, former commander of the Lebanese Force and peace activist. In 2010, he founded the Lebanese Nawraj NGO which promotes pluralism, diversity, dialogue and peace in Lebanon. Nawraj pursues the idea of a state based on freedom, equality, dignity and security for all citizens. It campaigns for improvements in health and education. The organisation creates sources

of income for people of all religious communities through development projects in agriculture, food processing and ecotourism.

Abou Nader has written the book “Le Liban: les défis de la liberté” (Éditions de L’Observatoire), in which he reports on his experiences and lists his solutions to free the country from its drastic situation.





"People who have a common project can develop a mentality of complementarity." Fouad Abou Nader (left) in conversation with Druze dignitaries.

compassed cultural, social, political, religious and literary realms. Lebanese Christians founded newspapers and magazines which disseminated the concepts of the Arab Renaissance. For example, the famous *Al Ahram*, a daily newspaper published in Cairo with a circulation of one million, was founded by two Lebanese Christians.

*To what extent has all this shaped the country's identity today?*

Lebanon is the only country in the Middle East that has no state religion, where Christians and Muslims have equal rights, where they share power, in fact, where the constitution stipulates that the head of state should be a Christian and not a Muslim. This coexistence on equal terms means that Muslims in Lebanon are dif-

ferent from those in the rest of the Muslim world. Neither can Lebanese Christians be compared to Christians in Italy, France or Germany. Christians and Muslims have always influenced each other and they developed a culture of mutual acceptance.

*Nevertheless, this country is experiencing a crisis that could hardly get any worse. Why?*

The main problem in Lebanon has always been the struggle for power between communities. Each religious group attempts to grab as much power as possible and seeks supporters abroad. We also have the problem that we like to disregard the real problems and just smile at each other instead of discussing them. When the Taif Agreement signed in 1989 ended the war in Lebanon, we all bluffed our way through it. The delegates of the different

parties who signed the agreement did not even manage to stay in the same room for more than an hour. They signed and that was it. They never asked the question of why they had waged this war against each other in the first place or why they now had to mourn so many deaths. The country is so paralysed today precisely because the power issue was never resolved. Since October 2019, that is, since the collapse of the banking system, the state has not managed to come up with a single solution that will help everyone.

*What is the reason why no common solutions can be found in Lebanon anymore?*

Everyone is still playing their own game. Since the founding of Lebanon a hundred years ago, we have been deluding ourselves that Christians and Muslims in Lebanon have entered into a marriage of love. But we are forced to admit that we are actually only united by a marriage of convenience.

*What is your vision of a new Lebanon?*

A Christian presence in Lebanon and in the whole Middle East is the paramount condition to preserve the coexistence of the different ethnic, religious and political groups, to form a national identity and to implement the concept of citizenship. Without the Christians, the Middle East would plunge into communitarianism, where only one religion would be tolerated throughout the entire national territory.

*What specific steps are needed in Lebanon to get things moving again?*

First of all, we must all come to the realisation that we have a problem, that we have never settled the power issue. Then



Nawraj/Dauplan et Raulin

At a pottery belonging to the Nawraj NGO

we need specific development projects that people can tackle together. This will lead the way for a mentality of mutual complementarity to evolve. And finally, we need to harmonise the law on citizenship. It should not be possible that people are allowed to have different rights in the field of family law as a function of the religion they come from.

*You grew up in a society of great diversity and know the problems and risks associated with this. How would you define the added value of diversity?*

For us Christians in Lebanon, diversity is a completely natural thing. But if you look at who lives side by side in the 1,611 villages in the country, you will find there are very few places where Shiites, Sunnis, Alawites or Druze live together, while Christians can live together with all other religious groups. This is why Christians are a stability factor, representing the unity of the country and peace. Christians are the bonding force in this country. If there were no Christians in Lebanon, there would be no culture of mutual acceptance.

*That is a very powerful statement. Can you elaborate?*

Among the 18 religious communities in Lebanon, four of which are Muslim, one Jewish and 13 Christian, it is the Christians who pass on the spirit of mutual acceptance in the numerous Christian schools. In most cases, the percentage of Muslim students in those schools is very high. In Baalbeck, for example, an area where conservative Shiites predominantly live, the waiting list for the Catholic sisters' school is three times longer than the number of places.

*This shows the advantage of diversity for non-Christians. They receive a good education from the Christians. But what advantage do Christians in Lebanon have from people who believe differently than they do?*

Christians can be proud that they have infected their Muslim fellow citizens with the virus of freedom. The fact that they live with them on an equal footing allows them to exert a positive influence on them. Let me put it this way: Lebanese Muslims realise they are different from Muslims in other countries. Normally, the hierarchy is very clear in the Shiite or Sunni tradition. They are the leaders, everyone else is a second-class citizen. This kind of attitude would not be tolerated in Lebanon, not even by Muslims, since contact with Christian citizens with equal rights has developed the mentality of Lebanese Muslims compared to their fellow believers in other countries. This is because all Lebanese citizens long to live with their neighbours in freedom, security, dignity and equality.

*However, Lebanon, where people have been fighting each other for 15 years, is a strik-*

*ing example of how diversity can lead to violence. You are now speaking about a culture of mutual acceptance. How does that all fit together?*

Lebanon is the first country where Christians and Muslims have proclaimed the Christian feast of the Annunciation of the Lord on 25 March as a work-free Islamic-Christian holiday. On this day, Christians and Muslims pray together for peace in the country. Jesus and Mary also play an important role in the Koran. Mary is even mentioned more often in the Koran than in the Bible.

*During the civil war, you yourself fought on the side of the Christian Forces Libanaises against non-Christians and non-Lebanese. Today you are regarded as a major advocate of diversity. What was the reason for this change of heart?*

First of all, I would not call it a civil war. It was a war that took place in Lebanon but involved many foreign powers. When I was fighting at the time, most of my opponents were not Lebanese, but Palestinians, Syrians and mercenaries from Arab and Islamic countries like Bangladesh or Afghanistan. Only about 20 per cent were really Lebanese. My opinion and my motives have not changed since then. I never fought against other people to drive them out of Lebanon, but to preserve the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon and the freedom and equality of Christians. Today I continue the same struggle, but fortunately I no longer need weapons to do so.

*Katja Dorothea Buck conducted the interview.*

## Common suffering, common future

### Christians and Yazidis in Iraq

There are many religious minorities in Iraq besides Christians: Zoroastrians, Yazidis, Mandeans, Baha'i, to name but a few. All of the groups are shrinking in numbers. Standing up for only one community is possible but makes little sense, as shown by the example of the Christians and Yazidis after the liberation from the terrorist militia Islamic State.

Yazidism is one of the oldest religions that believe in a single creator God. The religion is older than Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There are about one million Yazidis worldwide. Most of them live in the original main settlement areas in northern Iraq, northern Syria and south-eastern Turkey.

It is only in the last few years that the majority of Europeans have realised that this ethnic group exists at all. In 2014, the terrorist militia Islamic State (IS) carried out a genocide against the Yazidis in Iraq's Sinjar Mountains. Those who could not flee in time were given the choice by the terrorists of either converting to Islam or being killed. 10,000 lost their lives then. Hundreds of thousands fled. 7,000 women and girls were abducted, sold as slaves and abused. To this day, 3,000 of them have not returned. And hundreds of thousands of Yazidis still live in camps in the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. At the beginning of the year, the German Bundestag acknowledged the genocide of the Yazidis. In the middle of March, the German Foreign



Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Iraq and met for a long time with representatives of the Yazidis.

Germany has a good reputation in the region. The first actual aid programme was then offered by Baden-Württemberg which admitted around a thousand Yazidi women and children who were victims of the IS. The crimes committed against the people must be punished, said the German Foreign Minister. Since the international community had failed to prevent the genocide, it must at least “ensure that justice is done”. This is without doubt an important signal to the Yazidis, but also to all the other people in Iraq.

Baerbock spent four days there, more time than she has ever spent in any other country. On the other hand, she had no time to talk to a local church representative. She did not meet a single one, which caused considerable consternation, not only in the churches. Two weeks after the state visit to Lalish, the Yazidi holy site in northern Iraq, Mayan Khairi Saeed Beg, the Yazidi princess and



The IS occupied St George's Church in Mosul for three years, smashing all the crosses and destroying the interior. Nothing has been restored yet. An inscription on the outside wall says: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (John 13:34)

Katja Buck

the highest secular representative of the Yazidis, said she was infinitely grateful to Germany for all its support. However, she said, one should not forget the suffering of others: "Whoever sees the suffering of the Yazidis must not forget the suffering of the Christians. And vice versa. Those who care for Christians in Iraq should not forget the Yazidis. Only together we have a common future."

After all, we also have to worry about the Christians in Iraq. Since the US invasion 20 years ago, their numbers have dwindled from 1.5 million to 300,000. Those who could, went abroad. Iraq's total population, on the other hand, has almost doubled. This trend is particularly devastating in Mosul, where the IS drove out all 30,000 Christians in 2014. Virtually all churches were destroyed in the city on the Tigris which was home to over a million inhabitants. Even if some churches are currently being painstakingly rebuilt, regular church services are unlikely to take place there again. Hardly any Christians have returned so far to Mosul.

As opposed to the genocide of the Yazidis, what the IS did to the Christians cannot be called genocide – however horrific their experiences were. In addition to converting them to Islam, the IS terrorists allowed them, as followers of what Islam refers to as a book religion, to either submit to an Islamic regime as second-class citizens and pay a protection tax, or to flee. Hundreds of thousands from the Nineveh Plain did the latter, but only a few were murdered.

The memory of persecution and genocide, however, was still deeply entrenched in the collective memory of Christians. In 1915, the Young Turks of the Ottoman Empire targeted this religious community. 1.5 million Armenian Christians were killed. Tens of thousands of Assyrian and Aramaic Christians died in massacres or as they fled. At that time, 5,000 found refuge with the Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountains. Although typhus was rampant among them, they were given land where they could stay. And although the Young Turks had forbidden anyone to help Christians, Yazidi men rode out to meet the refugees to save straying women and children from dying. This story still unites Christians and Yazidis in Iraq to this day.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## Threatened minority or an integral part?

About Christians, Muslims and Jews in Palestine and Israel

**There are only a few Arab Christians left in the Holy Land. Whether they live in Israel or Palestine, their share of the population is less than two per cent. Those who call them a minority must realize that “minority” is not only a question of numbers, it is also a concept that can be used to make politics.**

There is an ongoing debate as to whether the Christians in Palestine are a minority or not. On one hand, some propose that Christians are a minority among the majority Palestinian Muslim and Israeli-Jewish populations, and therefore, are in a complex and threatening position. On the other hand, others argue that Christians in Palestine are not a minority, but are part of the general Palestinian population, and this attempt to see Palestinians as a minority is a colonial tactic of ‘divide and control.’

If we look at the first position, it is true that the Palestinian Christians are a small population compared to the Muslim and Jewish populations in Palestine. Christians have faced numerous challenges that have led to their minority status. Historical events such as the Islamic conquests, the rise of the Ottoman Empire, and the colonial period (especially Zionism) have had profound effects on the region’s Christian composition. Indeed, Christians have to face challenges, tensions and discrimination from both Israeli-Jews and Palestinian Muslims.

The opposing position argues that Palestinian Christians are not a minority but an integral part of the diverse fabric of Palestinian society. They stress that Christian presence and contributions have shaped the region’s cultural, social, and intellectual landscape for centuries, and continues to do so today. In fact, this camp further suggests that the attempt to view Palestinian Christians as a minority is a colonial strategy to fracture Palestinian society and solidarity between Christians and Muslims.

I personally think that these two positions are not necessarily in contradiction but are both true in Palestine today. That is to say, one cannot deny that Christians are a small population compared to the Muslim and Jewish populations. And that at times, Palestinian Christians can feel discriminated and threatened by their Palestinian Muslim brothers and sisters. This does not come as a surprise as the Palestinian struggle took on more of an Islamic character in the early 2000s and certain Muslim factions take conservative and extreme positions.

However, these tensions and differences have been overemphasized and exploited by colonial forces to further their goals. Whether it be the Ottomans, British or Zionists, these empires have sought to break the bond between Palestinian Christians and Muslims and divide these two populations in order to weaken a united front. This is especially the case in contempo-

**Anything but outsiders:  
Arab Christians on  
Maundy Thursday  
in Jerusalem**



Katja Buck

rary Western media, which likes to portray Palestinian Muslims as terrorists and extremists that persecute Christians. This is of course not the reality, and is backed by both qualitative and quantitative research and data. One cannot run away from the fact that Palestinian Christians have a deep sense of belonging to the Palestinian people, and are part of its make-up, and not some outsiders.

Whether one position seems more convincing than the other, it is always important to ask and investigate why people adopt or promote one position over the other. Why are people so eager to emphasize that Muslims and Christians do not get along? Or why is someone so eager to stress the unity among Palestinian Muslims and Christians? Oftentimes, these

individuals are seeking to paint either a simple picture or exploit their narrative for political gain and to convince people outside of Palestine to adopt a wider stance over the Palestinian-Israeli colonial conflict. Another important question to ask is who is promoting one position over the other. And are we actually listening to what Palestinian Christians have to say for themselves as opposed to Western commentators.

With all of the above said, the situation of Palestinian Christians is not homogeneous, and it is essential to recognize the diverse experiences and challenges faced by different Christian communities in various areas. In other words, Palestinians living in Bethlehem, Gaza, Jerusalem, Lydda and Nazareth will have very different experiences from each other. In any case, it is our responsibility to insure that Palestinian Christian society thrives and continues its rich traditions despite the Zionist colonial movement and other challenges in the region, for what is it worth if the Holy Land remains only with ancient stones and no living stones, i.e., no Christian Palestinians living the Christian faith.

*John S. Munayer (Jerusalem)  
is a theologian and political scientist. His  
main areas of expertise are Christians in  
Palestine and inter-religious dialogue.*

## Where God tests the unity between people

### An ode to Jerusalem

When a Christian looks down on the Old City from the Mount of Olives, it literally hits you in the eye: wow, that's Jerusalem! One immediately thinks of Psalm 122, one of David's songs for worshippers ascending the road to Jerusalem. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem."

When you gaze at this panorama, the Christian faith returns to its Jewish sources. And yet what adds to the beauty of this sight today is ... a mosque! But that's what Jerusalem is all about! On less than one square kilometre – that's about the size of the Platz der Republik in Berlin – God had the crazy idea to arrange the holiest site of Judaism, the holiest site of Christianity and the first holy site built by Islam.

The psalm continues: "Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together." And yet we only hear about the divisions and tensions in Jerusalem. The Bible rightly says of Jerusalem that she is both a treasure and a harlot. A joy and a torment. The entanglements between the religions can be like a powerful roller-coaster of emotions. Within a few weeks I witnessed scenes of unbearable hatred just because of religion. But time and again I also saw heaven open up thanks to the believers of the three monotheistic religions.



Perhaps that is precisely why Jerusalem can fulfil the role God has assigned her: to create a single body out of many. However, at least two conditions are required for this to happen. Firstly, you need to know very clearly who you are, that is, what religion you belong to and what faith you have. As in music, each person must stick faithfully to the score. And as in music, you not only have to be able to play your part, but also to listen to the persons next to you. Whoever can simultaneously master self-respect and listening to others will learn to distinguish all the harmonic subtleties of the whole. Taking one religion away from Jerusalem would be like removing an instrument from a Schubert trio. It would make no sense at all.

The second requirement is to accept that you have to play along. You can't simply leave the room with your violin tucked under your arm just because the cello is bigger or the piano started first.





Psalm 122 continues; "Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together."

One day I surprised my friend Ahmad praying. The inner peace that emanated from him taught me more than reading the Suras. You can't put on such a tranquil face unless you are completely at one with the Divine.

And what can one say about Christianity? About the 180,000 Arab Christians, in three denominations, divided into 13 rites, spread over as many dioceses, in an area barely larger than the federal state of Hesse? The extraordinary thing is that Christian families are living a constant ode to ecumenism. There is no family that does not consist of members of different denominations and rites. Every day they practise coming to terms with diversity without denying it or wanting to do away with it.

Among Western pilgrims, it is good manners to mock the chaotic conditions in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Yet it is one of the few places in the world where Christians of all cultures and denominations come together in the unity of faith in Jesus, who died and rose again here. That is overwhelming.

The Jerusalem I love is just that – a laboratory where God wants to unite us all without confusing us. What would happen if we took up this challenge?

*Since 2008, Marie-Armelle Beaulieu has been editor in chief of the Terre Sainte Magazine in Jerusalem, the magazine of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.*

People talk about Judaism in Israel. Yet there are widely diverse forms of the Jewish faith. And as in every mainstream, there is also a whole palette of different colours. You have to learn to discover that, when you look at the ultra-Orthodox dressed in black and white, every little detail has a meaning, like the number of buttons on their frock coats (if there are any), or whether they wear laces on their shoes or not.... You must train your eye and recognise the subtleties. It's like trying to hear all the notes of a symphony.

Islam seems the most coherent of the three religions in Jerusalem because Sunni Islam is the most widespread. I know little of the Qur'an, but I have come to appreciate some of the values of Islam: concern for others, generosity, hospitality and the prominence of prayer. "Come to prayer, come to bliss," the muezzin chants. And when he wakes us up in the middle of the night, he also has so much humour that he adds. "Prayer is better than sleep."

Katja Buck

## Seeing the enemy as a human being

### Palestinian liberation theologians on antisemitism

**People in Palestine are as reluctant to talk about antisemitism as about the Holocaust. The Sabeel liberation theology movement does it anyway. The movement recently published a book that deals with antisemitism in Palestinian society.**

**I**n Palestinian schools, the Holocaust against the Jews is not a subject that comes up in history lessons. Children and young people are usually ignorant of the fact that the Nazis sent six million Jews to their deaths. Yet even among adults, people either keep quiet about the Holocaust or cast doubt on the number of victims. The figures are blown out of all proportion to generate empathy for the Jewish cause worldwide, they say. And anyway, why should one be concerned with the Holocaust against the Jews when the world does not care that 750,000 Palestinians were dispossessed and expelled when the state of Israel was founded in 1948?!

The liberation theology lay movement Sabeel now provides a counter-argument to this common line of argumentation. “The foundations on which we struggle against Palestinian oppression are the same foundations on which we are committed to fighting against antisemitism. (...) It is wrong for the state of Israel to discriminate against, dispossess, and displace us, because we are as human as Israeli Jews are. Equally, it is wrong for anyone anywhere to hate, discriminate against, or seek to destroy Jews, because Jews – Israeli or not – are as human as we are”, it says in the foreword. After four years of work, Sabeel published the book “This is Where

We Stand – A Sabeel Reflection on Anti-semitism” in April 2023. It is intended to help “identify where we may be caught up in prejudice or discrimination”. And later: “when identification with our own becomes exclusive and we neglect to see the suffering of others outside of our group, we fail to be fully human. This leaves the door open to racism, hatred, and discrimination.”

“We call for Palestinians to make clear distinctions between the actions of the state of Israel and the actions of Jews,” it says in the book. So far, it is only available in English but it will soon be translated into Arabic. When a Palestinian talks about antisemitism, it is important not to ignore “the challenges faced by Palestinians daily”. Therefore, the commitment against antisemitism and the commitment for justice in Palestine are two sides of the same coin for Sabeel. The book concludes: “The fight against Jew-hatred and the fight against Palestinian oppression are inseparable parts of the larger struggle to which we are called – as Christians, as Palestinians, or simply as human beings: the universal struggle for human dignity and human rights, whenever these are denied to anyone anywhere.”

Israeli Jesuit David Neuhaus describes the book as “important, courageous and creative”. Important because it links antisemitism to the suffering of the Palestinians. Courageous, because this debate is by no means welcome in Palestinian society and it is seen as a weakness to let the suffering and fear of others get to one’s heart and so perceive the real enemy as a human



A frank discussion about antisemitism is like breaking through the wall of silence and ignorance.

being. “The approach is creative because it paints a picture of a future in which there is no antisemitism, no racism, no Islamophobia, but also no occupation, no discrimination and no violence,” says Neuhaus.

In the book, Sabeel is also preaching to those who have long been involved in interreligious dialogue. Hana Bendcowsky, Directress of the The Rossing Center, the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR), has long been advocating that people should come to terms with the fears and suffering of others and listen to them with empathy. Only then, she says, is an honest exchange possible. “Fighting against antisemitism involves fighting against all forms of injustice, Islamophobia and human rights violations.”

Sabeel also receives recognition for the book from Guy Alaluf. “I am grateful that Sabeel has tackled this issue and sees antisemitism as a problem that Pal-

estinian society must deal with,” says the Orthodox Rabbi and lecturer on the Bible and the Talmud. He has read the text three times and could not find anything he would not say himself in the same way. How antisemitism is described is exactly how it feels to him as a Jew. The concept of Zionism, namely the idea of a homeland for the Jewish people, is examined very precisely in the book and described as a colonial project at the expense of others. “We need to come to a new definition of Zionism,” Alaluf said. This, he said, must include “that God wants us all here in this land with equal rights, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians.” Then Israelis and Palestinians could build a new Israel together. “The book gives me the hope that this is possible,” said the Rabbi.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

Download the book as a PDF file (\$5) from [www.fosna.org/fosnabookstore](http://www.fosna.org/fosnabookstore)

## Bishop's visit to the Schneller schools

**Stuttgart/Khirkbet Kanafar/Amman (EVS).** In the middle of May, Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Württemberg, visited both Schneller schools in Lebanon and Jordan. At the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon, he took part in the inauguration ceremony of a new training workshop for electricians. In future, it will not only be possible to teach industrial electricians but also provide vocational training in electric vehicles.



ElkWue/Keim

The workshop was officially inaugurated with the cutting of the white ribbon.



EMS/Gräbe (4)

Walk through the grounds in Amman: Uwe Gräbe, Bishop Gohl, Christine Keim, ecumenical officer of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg, Khaled Freij and a journalist.

In Jordan, Gohl attended a meeting of the Administrative Board of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS). The director, Reverend Khaled Freij, presented his plans for the comprehensive renovation of the boarding home building. It became clear that this would be hardly feasible without

investing a sum of around one million euros. The TSS will have to rely on additional donations. One of the highlights of the academic year is the end-of-year celebration, at which students who have passed their school-leaving exams are given special honours. Bishop Gohl had the oppor-



The new hangar where the electrical apprentices have already moved to. In future, this is also where vocational training on electric cars will take place.



Bishop Gohl in one of the classrooms of the Theodor Schneller School.



Bishop Gohl is shown around the Johann Ludwig Schneller School by Director George Haddad. Behind them their two wives, Laure Haddad and Gabriela Gohl.

tunity to join in this great celebration. The performances of the theatre group and the school choir under the direction of Qamar Badwa, a highly motivated music teacher and singer, were outstanding. For the Bishop of Württemberg, it was a special pleasure since this music project had

been initiated some time ago by a donation from his church.

Bishop Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl writes about his impressions of the two schools in his reflection on page 2.

# The feeling of being able to breathe again

A former student of the TSS reminisces

Omar Taweel is 18 years old and graduated from the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman in 2020. He still has fond memories of his time at the boarding home and at the school. This summer, Omar will sit his “tawjihi”, i.e. his high school diploma, and then he wants to apply for university.

To be honest, my time at the boarding home was the best in my life. I was also in the first grade at the TSS, but only in the day school. Back then, I always went to school on my own by bus. In my huge pockets I had the bus fare, and one day I also had an extra dinar that my mother had given me. When I arrived at school, I was shocked to find that the money had fallen out of my pocket. My teacher got out in front of me and bent down to pick up the money. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. I was appalled and went to the headmistress to complain about the teacher. He was called to her office but I then found that my dinar was still in my pocket. Fortunately, the teacher took it all lightly and even gave me his dinar.

But then my family took me out of school again because my uncles were annoyed that I was at a Christian school. Besides, the school was far away. My parents had just separated and my mother was afraid of losing custody if I didn't live with her.

There are three different school authorities in Jordan. Most schools in Jordan are state or public schools. Then there are the so-called UNRWA schools for children of Palestinian origin living in the camps.



“The TSS helps children to find their way in life,” says Omar Taweel.

There are also public schools like the TSS. In state schools, learning is not taken so seriously. And in the UNRWA schools, you are not well prepared for secondary school, where you can then do your high school diploma.

I got to know all three types of schools. After the first grade at the TSS, I transferred to a UNRWA school. From there I returned to the TSS in eighth grade and was also in the boarding home there. My previous school was like a prison. Sch-

neller is the complete opposite. Even the path from the entrance gate to the boarding home is beautiful. I love the green of the meadows and trees in spring, but also the fields in summer.

I felt I could breathe again at the TSS and I was much better off than at my previous school. In government or UNRWA schools for boys, there is a lot of fighting. Children also usually bring knives to school. At the TSS I never experienced such violence. Of course we had fights sometimes. There were scuffles from time to time, especially in the residential groups, but it was more like a fight between brothers and they never really got serious. My educator Adham was like a father to me during this time and looked after me during the difficult times.

The boarding home at the TSS is important for three reasons. Children who have no family can find a family and a home here. Children who have no time for learning and no support can find all that here. That's because everything at the TSS is very well planned and structured. This can help children to find their way in life. Children who don't get any food or clothes at home are well looked after here. It all sounds very simple but for many children it makes an enormous difference.

The Covid pandemic was a very difficult time for me. Suddenly, the TSS was no longer a safe haven and I was living with my family again. On top of that, the lockdown in Jordan was very strict. At some point, money became scarce and we had no food at home at all. I started working

instead of attending online classes. When we only had yoghurt and flour at home, I tried to bake some kind of bread with it. While it was baking in the oven, I read in the Qur'an because that is supposed to increase a person's blessings. The bread turned out huge.

The losses due to Covid caused me difficulties when I went to secondary school afterwards to do my high school diploma. I have since caught up well with everything and now I'm preparing for my final exams in the summer of 2023. I plan to apply to many universities, especially abroad because I would love to study something with languages. For example, I can imagine studying for a translation degree in Turkey or in Germany. In any case, there's nothing keeping me in Jordan at the moment.

*This article came about after a conversation  
Lisa Schnotz had with Omar Taweel.  
Lisa Schnotz is member of the board of the  
Evangelical Association for the Schneller  
Schools.*

## When a host country runs out of steam

Lebanon no longer wants to look after Syrian refugees

In the midst of Lebanon's political, economic and ecological collapse, a drama is unfolding that is gradually slipping from the world's attention. In the meantime, even religious authorities in Lebanon are demanding that aid should only be given to Syrian refugees on Syrian territory.

When you drive from the airport towards the city of Beirut, a crowd of Syrian refugee women and children will probably rush up to the car at the first traffic light, begging for money. At Hamra, at one time the fashionable night-life district of the city, it seems you are surrounded by Syrians: shoe-shine boys, begging children running after you with stubborn perseverance, tugging at your clothes, bedraggled mothers on the street corners holding their babies out to visitors. Then... you are devoid of any emotion. What may have shocked you on your first visit to this city eventually becomes the norm and loses its importance. At best, I pay for two or three portions at the snack bar on the corner when I eat a man'oushe, the delicious Arabic pizza. The long established baker knows best who needs a free portion the most.

There is a broad consensus in Lebanese society that the refugees from the Syrian war should leave the country as soon as possible – for three reasons: The Syrian war is more or less over; the plight of the Lebanese themselves is now indescribable; and if the predominantly Sunni refugees were to stay permanently, this would mas-



Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl, the Evangelical Lutheran Bishop of Württemberg, in conversation with the Grand Mufti of Lebanon, Sheikh Abdul Latif Darian.

sively endanger the „confessional proportionality“ on which the state institutions have been founded since the National Pact of 1943.

As early as 27 September 2022, the Lebanese Ministry of Education published a decree prohibiting the country's public schools (attended by the majority of Lebanese children of school age) from accepting Syrian students. Any attempt to „integrate“ these refugees would be a punishable „offence against the state and public order“. There are regular cases of refugees who are deported across the border to Syria. Although Lebanon continues to be a country without an elected government and without a president, the state still appears capable of acting, at least where this is concerned.

This was the tense situation in May when the delegation of Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg, paid a visit to





EMS/Gräbe (2)



Gohl also spoke with the Maronite Patriarch, Bishara Cardinal Raï, about the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

the Maronite Patriarch, Bishara Cardinal Raï, and to the Grand Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon, Sheikh Abdul Latif Darian. These highest religious authorities in the country not only exert a spiritual but also a considerable political influence in view of the confessional proportional representation in Lebanon.

Both have appealed to the world community to aid Syrian refugees on Syrian territory and no longer in Lebanon. A country of less than five million citizens, most of whom are no longer able to feed themselves, is simply unable to cope with looking after around two million Syrians. Continuing international refugee aid in Lebanon, the patriarch said, was an attempt by the „West“ to solve a problem at the expense of an already destitute third party. Moreover, it was simply a denial of reality in the face of the obvious fact that Assad had unfortunately won the war in Syria.

The number of 30,000 to 40,000 Syrians who crossed the border during Ramadan to visit family was repeatedly cited as proof that refugees could easily return to Syria. Of course, this is only a fraction of the total „two million“ – a figure that has been repeatedly mentioned, but probably includes not only refugees as well as Syrian citizens who have been resident in Lebanon for a long time. Consequently, Patriarch Raï did not delve any further into this question, but expressly praised the joint commitment of Protestant churches in Lebanon and Württemberg which are connected through the EMS and the EVS. When state institutions can no longer function, church institutions are all the more important, he said. Only through the living global solidarity of Christians and prayer for one another is it possible to give support and hope to the people in Lebanon.

*Uwe Gräbe*

# The church must stand firm in all crises

National Evangelical Church in Beirut celebrates 175 years

Despite all the misery and lack of perspective, the sponsoring church of the JLSS in Lebanon, the National Evangelical Church Beirut (NECB), celebrated its 175th anniversary with a service and a small reception. It clearly showed how important it is to empower and encourage the church's ecumenical brothers and sisters, especially in times of crisis.

A heap of ruins, a lair of jackals – this is an image that frequently recurs in the Bible for Jerusalem after it was devastated by the Babylonians. It is an image that would also suit Beirut very well today, according to Rima Nasralla, Lebanese Protestant pastor and university lecturer.

Is it possible to celebrate a happy church anniversary in a situation of total economic, political and humanitarian melt-

down? The NECB has existed in this city for 175 years. People have always worked to ensure that this church would continue to proclaim the redeeming message of Jesus Christ even under the most difficult conditions. But now there was need of an outside occasion to commemorate this anniversary. On 14 May, Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg, will be visiting together with a small delegation from his church, the EMS and the Schneller Association. It was all the more reason to host a festive service and a small reception during which the importance of an international community, which empowers and encourages the church's ecumenical brothers and sisters, is reiterated time and again, especially in times of crisis.

In his sermon on the bible quote of the Jubilee Year 2023 (Genesis 16:13), Gohl gave the Lebanese brothers and sisters the biblical promise that God sees them and is watching over them. Video messages of encouragement were sent by German EMS member churches, namely, Heike Springhardt, Bishop of the Protestant Church in Baden, Volker Jung, Church President of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau and Detlev Knoche, Chair of the EMS



EMS/ELKWue

Kerstin Sommer and Uwe Gräbe present an Easter candle to the NECB's Senior Pastor, Habib Badr, on behalf of the EVS and EMS.

Mission Council. During the service, Kerstin Sommer, Chair of the Schneller Association, handed over a large Easter candle as a symbol of the light of Christ. The ecumenical presence at this anniversary was also impressive and it was quite natural for high-ranking clergy from neighbouring churches – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – to also attend the ceremony.

Within this community, Rima Nasrallah managed to give a surprising twist to the image of ruins and howling jack-

als. She is to speak about the future of her church – like the prophet Isaiah who proclaims the word of God in the midst of all desolation: “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah, 43:18-21) This „new thing“ is announced by jackals, the inhabitants of the ruins, who suddenly stop howling and start singing God’s praise (verse 20). It is now promised to the people of this city that they will finally be able to join in this praise – and it is up to the local church to encourage others to do the same.

*Uwe Gräbe*

## Students help earthquake victims

**Stuttgart/Beirut (EMS).** Two German students in Lebanon started a relief campaign for the earthquake victims in northern Syria. They were supported by their university – the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut – and their sending organisation, the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS). “Our aim was to fill two trucks with relief supplies and send them to an old people’s home and medical centres in Aleppo,” says Anna Kierdorf, who is studying theology in Bonn and is currently spending a semester abroad in Lebanon. Her co-student at the university in Beirut is theology student Antonia Kura from Berlin. “We are deeply shocked by the fate of the people in this region which is already ravaged by war. We started the aid campaign as a gesture of solidarity with them,” says the 26-year-old.

On the night of 6 February 2023, severe earthquakes destroyed countless buildings in the Turkish-Syrian border region. Tens of thousands of people died. The tremors were so strong that they were felt in neighbouring Lebanon. “For days, we

saw how our fellow Syrian students were worried about the welfare of their relatives,” the two students report. “Every aftershock triggered new prayers and fears. To alleviate the despair and helplessness, we all decided we had to do something together to help.”



Antonia Kura und Anna Kierdorf standing behind the stack of relief supplies shortly before they were transported to Aleppo.

## Templer cemeteries in the Middle East



The Swabian Templers in the Holy Land have always been a fascinating topic of research. They were members of the pietist sect who went to Palestine in the middle of the 19th century and founded their colonies in pious expectation of the Kingdom of God. Jakob Eisler and Ulrich Gräf have now succeeded in completing the documentation of the last resting places of the Templers in the Holy Land. They have compiled two large-format illustrated volumes presenting all the surviving gravestones and, as far as can be ascertained, all the persons they contain. The two researchers also provide short biographies showing the family relationships between the interred persons. The graves that still exist today in the cemeteries in Jerusalem and Haifa are not the only focus of their attention. They also describe connections as far away as Egypt and Broumana in Lebanon.

This voluminous work was presented at a conference in June at the Landeskirchliches Archiv (Archive of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg) in Stuttgart-Möhringen, attended by an unexpectedly large number of visitors. While Jakob Eisler spoke about the origins of the Templer cemeteries in the Middle East, Ulrich Gräf explained the historical evolution of the gravestones and their inscriptions, reflecting how the art of stonemasonry was also subject to the contemporary taste of the times.

Finally, the Israeli historian Haim Goren gave a touching lecture on the first attempted settlements of a Templer group

in Jezreel Valley near Nazareth: It was not long before this community was so worn down by disease and numerous deaths that Goren himself was only able to recover a single gravestone from this early phase. Otherwise, all traces of this enterprise have been lost. Despite such setbacks, the Templers remained undeterred and continued to hold on to their vision.

It was not until 1950 that the state of Israel expelled the last remaining Templers from the country. This occurred after the majority of members belonging to this community had joined the NSDAP and practically all of them had been interned by the British authorities. Today, many of their buildings have been beautifully restored.

Finally, Jörg Klingbeil, the Regional Director of the Temple Society in Germany, explained how the two remaining cemeteries have been maintained to this day. Despite all the challenges (including the occasional vandalism) that such efforts still face today, it is nothing short of a miracle that the legacy of the German Templers is still maintained and respected in Israel today.

*Uwe Gräbe*

Book orders: Landeskirchliches Archiv, Balingen Str. 33/1, 70567 Stuttgart, [archiv@elk-wue.de](mailto:archiv@elk-wue.de)  
The two volumes cost €79 plus shipping; the two volumes cannot be ordered separately.

## Letters to the editor

Referring to SM 1/2023

Thank you for another highly interesting and topical issue: interfaith dialogue:



Iranians (Shiites) and Saudis (Sunnis) are talking to each other. I pray that this dialogue will extend to Lebanon for the benefit and welfare of all the Lebanese people. I realise that this is all to do with politics, but a peaceful dialogue can resolve many issues. Thank you once again to all the people who contribute to the great work you are doing.

*Aziz Shalaby, USA*

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*Do not merely listen to the word,  
and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*

James 1:22



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