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# SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



**WHO AM I AND WHERE DO I BELONG?**  
**CHRISTIAN IDENTITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST**



**EVS Evangelical Association  
for the Schneller Schools**

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Dear Readers,

nowhere else in the world are there so many different churches with their own theologies, liturgies and traditions as in the Middle East. Such diversity is often confusing for outsiders. Here in our country we often assume that the keyword “Christians in the Middle East” refers to a homogeneous group. In this issue of the Schneller Magazine we want to set this image straight and point out some of the many different facets of Christian identity in the Middle East. Rima Nasrallah reports about mixed denominational marriages. Uta Zeuge-Buberl describes the current conflict between Lebanese Protestants and their Evangelical heritage. Bishop Gabriel from Vienna describes the Copts in the Austrian diaspora as a wonderful mixture of the two cultures. Mark Calder provides insights into the self-perception of Syriac Orthodox Christians who settled in Bethlehem after the genocide of 1915. Pieter Dronkers writes about the difficult question which Palestinian Christians living in Israel must answer for themselves: do we belong to Israel or to Palestine? And of course an issue of the Schneller Magazine would not be complete without articles about the Schneller identity. George Haddad provides an answer to this question.



Photo: Kleinfeldt

Ecumenism lives from the fact that we know about the special facets and differences of our partners and friends. This also applies to the dialogue with Islam. “Islam has just as many faces as followers in Germany,” declared Professor George Tamer in his talk before the Annual General Assembly of the EVS in November. If one wants to talk with Muslims of either gender, one should know who one is talking to. One should also know one’s own roots and conditioning. That is why the Schneller schools do not exclude the subject of religion from everyday life.

On behalf of the entire team I would like to thank you for your interest in Schneller work and for your commitment. Wishing you an enjoyable read.

Yours,

Katja Dorothea Buck

## GOD IS A GOD OF THE FUTURE

God's identity is secure: "I AM WHO I AM". However cryptic as the tetragrammaton JHWH in Exodus 3:14 may be, God's self-revelation in the burning bush communicates beyond all doubt that God is God. The bush burns, but is not consumed. God's identity is infinite, it cannot cease. Human existence, by contrast, is marked by insecurity, which is expressed in a life-long search for identity. "Who am I?" asked the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer shortly before his execution in 1945. Is our identity, our value, dependent on what others think of us, or are we rather that which we perceive ourselves to be? In context: Did Bonhoeffer lose all previous identity when he donned the simple garb of a prisoner? Or did he remain more than his outward appearance suggested?

In my own life, I often experience that someone attempts to decipher my identity by interpreting my surname, "Edwards-Raudonat", which is half Scottish and half East Prussian. The attempt is futile, as I am neither. I inherited "Edwards" from my father, whose ancestors came from Scotland. They immigrated to the United States some 300 years ago. "Raudonat" stems from my father-in-law, who was born in Elbing in East Prussia, though he lived most of his life in a village near the southern German, or better Swabian town of Ulm. When introducing myself, I like to describe myself as a "Swabian-American", referring to the fact that though I grew up in the United States, I married a Swabian woman and have for more than

thirty years served as a Lutheran minister in Swabian-speaking Wuerttemberg. This description is, of course, an exaggeration, as I to this day am unable to speak the Swabian dialect. It is also incomplete, as it makes no reference to the seven years I lived and worked in West African Ghana.

### To deny one's identity is self-denial

In December 2016, a 24-year-old man named Anis Amri committed an atrocious act of terror at a Christmas Market in the German capital city of Berlin, killing 12 persons and injuring 53, 14 of them critically. In the aftermath of that event, it became known that Amri had used a total of 14 different identities in the past several years. In other words, he tried 14 times to deny his original identity by assuming a new one. It didn't work. We can never simply sever our roots. Citizenship, outward appearance, native language – such elements do determine our identity, whether we embrace them or would rather break with them. To deny this is to deny oneself. Amri's tragic life is a powerful illustration of the futility of self-denial.

Yet even if we accept ourselves for what we are, we still do not necessarily know who we are. Bonhoeffer resolved this tension by placing the question of identity firmly in God's hands: "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine." God, who created me, will never disown me, meaning that my identity, as I perceive it, really is mine. My father, George Edwards, U.S. American, biblical scholar, lifelong pacifist and defining influence



**April 1988: Reverend Riley Edwards-Raudonat is blessed by Reverend Joseph Obodai, the then dean of the Northern church district of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.**

is as unshakable as God's own "I will be who I will be." For me, the Swabian-American with an African branch, it means that in God, we transcend the limitations of our physical identity to become something more: a part of God's own identity.

*Reverend Riley Edwards-Raudonat is Liaison Secretary for Africa at the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS).*

on my own identity, liked to take this a step further by interpreting the tetragrammaton JHWH with the philosopher Ernst Bloch and others as: "I will be who I will be." This means that God is a God of the future, which is at the core of Bloch's "principle of hope".

For my father, this meant believing that the biblical shalom, present today only as fleeting moment of grace, will one day be all-encompassing. It meant sowing the seeds of peace today, regardless of whether we live to reap the harvest. It meant living today with a glimpse of tomorrow. As my father liked to say: "If we don't live towards hope, then we don't really live." Identity thus perceived

## INCENSE, CHORALS AND ICONS

### When Protestant men marry Orthodox women

**When a person marries into another church, he or she must deal with a new way of living the faith. In the Protestant church in Lebanon, there are many women who originally stem from Maronite or Orthodox families. They have developed their very own way of living their faith.**

The Church bells began ringing, the service came to an end and the faithful streamed out of the beautiful Protestant Church in Beirut. As the organ music drifted across the garden into the Sunday School, Mona arrived to collect her grandson. She opened her purse and took out a napkin, unwrapped a cube of bread and was about to stuff it into the little boy's mouth. 'Oh, was there communion today?' I asked having missed the service by staying in the Sunday School. 'No,' said Mona hesitantly. 'Ah, this?' pointing to the Qurban in her hand, 'This ... it's ...it's not from here.

Like many women in the Protestant Churches in Lebanon, Mona has a multiple liturgical belonging. In fact, up to 90% of marriages in this relatively young church are between a Protestant man and non-Protestant woman. Abiding by tradition, these women join their husband's church, where they are expected to act as Protestant congregants. Yet, the Protestant Church confronts them with a totally different spiritual reality than what they are used to. Eastern Churches with Byzantine and Syriac heritages, even if theologically and liturgically different from each other, share a certain Anti-

ochian discourse and express their faith in a demonstrative style far from the didactic and verbal practices of the Protestant tradition. A clear choice for either one or the other of these denominations seems to be inevitable, nevertheless the women considered refuse to choose.

### Their own liturgical calendar

In the move from a mother church into a hosting church they do not totally abandon the old nor officially convert into the new. The two (or more) traditions remain present in the life of the women. Many women like in the case of Mona, continuously move and mix between the many churches and traditions available. Each woman develops her own liturgical calendar. They choose certain feasts, fasts and days to keep from each of the traditions. One of the women for example, observes Lent with the Protestants but celebrates Easter with the Orthodox; she dropped Marial feasts but celebrates Saint Elijah, etc. One lady regularly uses incense in her home; but as she walks with her copper sensor she hums the Protestant Hymn 'Bless the Lord oh My Soul'. Liturgical music, iconography, liturgical foods and hagiography combine to make these liturgical lives a workshop of artistic bricolage. Concepts and practices are continuously revisited and reshaped and the result is a complex unstable product.

### Moving between traditions

As they move between traditions, theological concepts are revisited and reinterpreted in light of 'other' concepts and



Photo: Rima Nasrallah van Saane

**Bread from the Orthodox Eucharist for the Protestant grandson.**

practices. There seems to be a continuous evaluation of the Mass, the Eucharist, salvation by faith alone, intercession of Saints, priesthood of all believers, the work of the Holy Spirit, the function of icons, and, of course, the place and role of the Virgin Mary. The women find themselves making theological decisions constantly and questioning taken-for-granted concepts and practices.

They are rather 'invisible' to the liturgical elite which gives them freedom to navigate in-between official borders. They do not create hybrid selves which simply join two identities together but create new and ever renewing ones where

many strands keep mixing together. The women would not identify themselves as simply Orthodox or Protestant or even as a joining of both but as their own personal mixed Christian self and become, thus, both comfortable in many liturgical settings and critical of them.

These fluid liturgical lives confuse the liturgical experts around the women, even if not always taken seriously. They are homemade constructions that cannot be judged nor classified by the onlookers. They stand as a challenge to the illusion of liturgical purity and separation and are a living critique to the often-fossilized practices of existing traditions.

*Rima Nasrallah-van Saane is a theologian living in Beirut. Her doctorate thesis based on this subject was published in 2015 under the title "Moving and Mixing" – The Fluid Liturgical Lives of Antiochian Orthodox and Maronite Women Within the Protestant Churches in Lebanon" (ISBN/EAN 978-94-6108-913-7)*



## BRINGING OUT LATENT TALENTS

The secret of Schneller work



Photo: EMS/Buck

At evening prayers, the children and young people sometimes hear stories of encouragement.

**Is there a unique Schneller identity? And if so, is it rather more German or rather more Arabic or something totally different? For George Haddad, director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon, one thing is certain: it's all about bringing the best out of each child.**

It's Thursday evening at the Johann Ludwig Schneller school. Homework is done, the rooms tidied and all the things are packed and ready for going home tomorrow. The campus church bells start to sound on the dot of seven o'clock and the children and young people accompanied by their educators go together to evening prayers. After the first chorale, Reverend George Haddad tells

about a trip to Salzburg and about his visit to Mozart's Geburtshaus (birthplace). He said he was shocked to see the simple conditions in which one of the greatest musicians of all time had grown up. Judging by the magnificent music which Mozart bequeathed to humanity, it could be assumed he had been born in a castle. On the contrary, Mozart's birthplace is so small and crooked and almost a bit shabby.

At this point there are probably many in the church who would ask why the director would talk about Mozart at evening prayers on that evening. Haddad quickly supplies an answer: "There may be a genius lurking in every one of you, no matter what conditions you come from". His intention is to give courage to



the children and young people sitting before him on the church pews. The children who live at the boarding home of the Schneller school need this encouragement. They all come from very simple and often very difficult conditions. Probably nobody has ever made them think that there could be a hidden genius in them.

During a meeting on the next day, George Haddad explains in greater detail what Schneller work is all about. "In the history of the Syrian Orphanage and the Schneller schools, we have often had the experience that someone who was destined to herd goats and sheep became a bishop, doctor or engineer. But to get there, the person needs to work very hard and be tolerant and friendly." The Schneller approach has the tools which are needed to achieve a disciplined upbringing including tolerance and peace education. "It's all about bringing the best out of each child. We don't want to change his or her personality, but we do want the child to know about his or her talents so they can bring them to the fore.

As a result of his study of Schneller history, Haddad knows that Johann Ludwig Schneller did not invent anything new when he founded the Syrian Orphanage in 1860. Instead he introduced what he had learnt as a young teacher in the Swabian region of Wuerttemberg. However, Schneller should not be accused of colonialism. "He was clever enough to adapt everything to local conditions," says Haddad. Respect for the other culture was something that the Schneller family implicitly assumed right from the start. The current director remembers it was not without reason that, when people talked about Hermann Schneller, grandson of Johann Ludwig Schneller and founder of

the Johann Ludwig Schneller school in Lebanon, they said he was not a German from Germany but a brother from Jerusalem and summarises the secret of Schneller work in these words: "Preserve from your culture of origin what is good for the other. And respect in the new culture what is good for the other."

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## INFORMATION

*In this school year, 301 children attend the Johann Ludwig Schneller School. 91 of them live in the ten boarding groups at the home. Overall, 79 per cent of Schneller pupils are Muslim (Sunnis, Shi'ites, Druzes, as well as three Yazidis). The percentage of Muslim pupils living at the boarding home is even 85 per cent.*

*Over the past four years, Director George Haddad has observed that it is becoming more and more difficult to attract Christian pupils to the boarding home. One of the reasons lies in the different upbringing styles. In his experience, Muslim children have a much stricter upbringing whereas Christian parents can no longer imagine sending their children to a boarding home. However it is difficult for the school when there is such an enormous change in the majority situation. "The dialogue concept only makes sense when the groups are about the same size," says Haddad. This is why the school is contemplating whether it would make more sense to introduce an alternative boarding system. For example children could be looked after the whole day long, from early morning to the evening and also have rooms where they can retreat to. They would then spend the night with their parents. (kb)*

## NOT AN IMPLANT FROM THE WEST

### Protestantism in Lebanon has its own Middle Eastern character

**Currently, it can be observed that many Evangelical parishes, families, schools and institutions in Lebanon are reappraising their Protestant heritage. In times of uncertainty the smallest of the Christian minorities is ascertaining its role and presence.**

**O**n a walk through the Beirut district of Hamra you may not necessarily realise that there are three institutions in the direct vicinity whose roots can be traced back to the work of Protestant missionaries in the 19th century: the American University of Beirut (AUB), the Lebanese American University (LAU) and the Near East School of Theology (NEST). In the past few years, all three educational institutions have started to look back at their roots and have revealed the history of their origins to the public in the form of exhibitions, book publications and reappraisals of their archives. This review of their Protestant heritage was recently observed in many Protestant parishes, schools and families in Lebanon. What is the reason behind this?

Let's take a look back at the past. Missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions who set up their mission station in Beirut first wanted to bring about a reformation of the existing Oriental churches based on Luther's model instead of establishing their own Protestant church. However, due to the initiative of the first local converts and support from the missionaries, the Beirut Church was finally founded in 1848. Today, it is known as the National Evangelical Church of Beirut. This was fol-

lowed by other parishes in the country. However, they were long subjected to the control and paternalism of the American Mission. It was only after decades and finally the progressive reduction in American missionary activities in Osmanian Syria and later in the Republic of Lebanon, did the Protestant parishes succeed in emancipating themselves and giving a special individual character to their parish life which had been influenced by the Western Presbyterian church.

Indeed, what were imported were the ideas of the Reformation and the related concepts of freedom, subjectivity and individualism. However, the Protestant faith cannot simply be regarded as a Western implant in a Middle Eastern Christianity which had grown over the course of centuries. Political upheavals, historical events and social challenges resulted in the transformation and adaptation of Protestant ideas to the Middle Eastern culture. Subsequently this also changed the self-perception and self-awareness of Protestants in Lebanon during the course of history.

Today, we see how committed Protestant parishes are towards living Ecumenism and Christian-Muslim dialogue in the multi-religious society of Lebanon and among the institutions mentioned above this primarily applies to the Near East School of Theology. Their religious practice is based on Western Protestant principles but they also have an identity as Lebanese who are no longer exposed to hostility from other Christian denominations as were the American missionaries

and the first generations of converts in the past.

A vital part of their self-identity is a reappraisal of the beginnings of Protestantism in their home country of Lebanon. Family archives are brought to light, jubilees are festively celebrated, such as the so-called “Van Dyck Bible”, and young scientists discover the value of recatalogued and digitised manuscripts and historical eyewitness accounts which now need to be evaluated. This has everything to do with maintaining traditions in a region whose future appears more and more to be in jeopardy. It has to do with legitimising the presence of Protestantism in the Middle East. This presence also influenced other Christian churches from a theological point of view; it had a sustainable impact on the establishment of an extensive education system for men and women and was directly involved in the development of the modern Arab language. Lebanon is no longer conceivable without the presence of the smallest Christian minority. We hope that this reappraisal of the past will provide them with the self-confidence and strength to also contribute towards peaceful coexistence in Lebanon in the future.



**Formerly the flagship of the Protestant Mission in the Middle East: the American University in Beirut.**

*Uta Zeuge-Buberl works for the Department for Integration and Diversity of the Municipal Council of the City of Vienna. Her doctorate thesis entitled “The Mission of the American Board in Syria in the 19th Century” was published in 2016 and will also appear in English this year.*

## WHERE DO YOU BELONG?

### Christian-Palestinian loyalties in the Israeli context

**Christian Palestinians in Israel must answer this question for themselves: do they regard themselves as Israelis or Palestinians? A campaign now intends to persuade young Christians to join the Israel Defence Forces.**

'It is a dilemma of an identity crisis'. This is how Butros Mansour, the director of the Arab Baptist School in Nazareth, responded to a 2014 campaign to persuade Palestinian Christians to join the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).<sup>1</sup> Whereas it is an obligation for Jewish citizens, national military service is voluntary for Palestinian Israelis. Traditionally, most Palestinian Israelis feel a strong solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and therefore decide not to join the IDF. However, the pressure to enlist and thus show more solidarity with the state of Israel is mounting, as of 2014 the IDF has sent preliminary conscription papers to all Arab Christians. Moreover, in 2013, the Israeli Christian Recruitment Forum was established to encourage Palestinian Christians to join the IDF. The Greek-Orthodox priest Gabriel Naddaf is the organisation's spokesperson.

In his attempt to convince Arab Christians to enlist voluntarily Naddaf and the forum use two arguments. Firstly, they mention the unrest in parts of the Middle East and the threat of Islamic extremist world views. Since Christians in Israel enjoy relative security, wealth, and free-

dom of religion, Naddaf believes that Christians should join the IDF to defend the country against radical Islam, placing the religious (Islamic) threat above ethnic (Palestinian) solidarity. Mansour, from the Arab Baptist School in Nazareth, criticizes this argument, since it weakens the 'common glue' between Palestinians, with fragmentation along religious lines as a result.

Secondly, Naddaf states that Christians in Israel are not Palestinians after all. In fact, they are 'Aramaic Christians', indigenous to the Holy Land. After a lobby by Naddaf and the initiative of the Likud Party, the Israeli government recognized Aramaic Christians as an official minority in 2014. Naddaf argues that since 'Aramaic Christians' are not Palestinians, they should join the IDF like the Druze do.

Despite Naddaf's campaign, the majority of Arab Christians continue to oppose conscription, citing solidarity with the Palestinian struggle as the main reason. The Palestinian theologian Yohanna Katanacho writes that he considers the occupation to be the main source of the tensions and violence. From this perspective, the campaign for conscription is another example of the 'divide and rule' policy towards non-Jewish minorities in Israel. Some Palestinian theologians, like Naim Ateek, make the broader argument that Christian gospel opposes any violent actions from any side. A more general reason not to join the IDF is that Palestinian Israelis often feel that they are treated as second-class citizens.

<sup>1</sup> Butros Mansour, 'Israeli army tries to lure Arab Christian recruits', *Al Monitor*, 5th of June 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/israel-army-arab-christian-recruit-palentine-nationalism.html>



<http://www.thetower.org/article/christians-in-the-holy-land-dont-call-us-arabs/>

The Greek Orthodox priest Gabriel Naddaf is spokesman for the Israeli-Christian recruitment forum persuading Israeli Christians to join the Israel Defence Forces.

‘Pioneers of true coexistence’ – this is what the Israeli media calls young Palestinian Christians who join the IDF. However, for Palestinian Christians themselves, things are more complicated. Most Christians are sceptical, feeling that they will never be able to fit in with the civic ideal of a state that presents itself not only as democratic but also as Jewish. They are hoping for a state that leaves more space for a multi-layered belonging. Unfortunately, in today’s world, this seems more and more improbable.

*Pieter Dronkers works at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam.*

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## GUARDIANS OF CHRIST'S LANGUAGE IN CHRIST'S LAND

### Syriac Orthodox Christians in Bethlehem

**Survivors of the genocide perpetrated against Syriac Christians in south east Turkey settled in Bethlehem in 1915. Since then, the language which Christ spoke can once again be heard in his home town. This circumstance alone places Syriac Orthodox Christians at the very heart of the town's story.**

**B**ethlehem is characterized by mercantile and ecclesiastical connections which are hundreds of years old and by the diversity of its inhabitants' ethnic and religious identifications. Some trace their heritage to Crusaders, others to the Arabian peninsula, still others to their New Testament forebears in the Holy Land itself. One of the last great arrivals in Bethlehem was from south east Turkey in the wake of expulsions and slaughters of minorities at the hands of the Young Turk regime after 1915. Some of these were Aramaic speakers belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church, which already comprised a small flock in and around Jerusalem at the turn of the century; the 1870 Ottoman census records 150 Syriac Orthodox Christians in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Their numbers began to swell, and in 1927 a new church building was dedicated to Mary the Mother of God in the centre of Bethlehem, superseding a smaller building located in the upper room of an old khan nearby.

Since then, Syriac Christians, or "Syrians" as they are often known, have endured the ebbing and miserable flowing of conflict alongside their Palestinian compatriots in the town, but many also retain a keen sense of being from elsewhere. This

creates many possibilities, perhaps dilemmas, when it comes to understanding oneself as a Syriac Orthodox Christian in Bethlehem, not least in relation to others.

Many Syrians identify fully as Arab Palestinian. All now speak Arabic as their vernacular, although there is a revival of Syriac (liturgical Aramaic) teaching via their primary school in nearby Beit Jala, and the weekly performance of the Eucharist liturgy retains a great deal of the language. Indeed, the Syriac language is profoundly important to the majority of Syriac Orthodox Christians I have spoken to in Bethlehem, whether or not they themselves speak it. It isn't necessarily important in the same way to each of them, neither does it mean only one thing to express pride in it: for some it points to their being from elsewhere, whereas others instead highlight that Syriac would have been comprehensible to Bethlehem's most famous Aramaic-speaking son, Jesus, and that therefore it places them at the very heart of the town's story. Some assert their own distinctive Aramean or Assyrian lineage, others urge a full commitment to the Palestinian national cause as Palestinians.

Nevertheless, Bethlehem's Syrians generally express a great deal of pride in being Syrian: in their ancient forebears, in their beautiful liturgies, and, above all, in being the custodians of Christ's language in Christ's land. They express this through participating in the Community Association events and the Syriac Club, the well-attended Sunday church services and festivals, and through their famously well-drilled scouts band which served for





Photo: Mark Calder

**The Syriac Orthodox Archbishop with priests, monks and deacons during the Christmas liturgy in the Grotto of the Church of the Nativity.**

some time as the official band of late president Yasser Arafat.

Of course, this strong sense of group does not preclude hospitality. After several months of attending their Sunday masses, an elder told me, “We are so proud that you come to our mass. Your blood is the same as mine now!” Indeed, thereafter I was introduced to others as Syrian by some of my Syrian friends, and was included to a generous extent in debates and controversies within the community. This leads me to believe that, to some extent, being Syrian in Bethlehem is not only to enter into the prestigious but painful story of the Syrian people as told throughout the diaspora, but to connect it decisively to the Incarnation of God in their town and the evoking of God in their

language, which therefore always allows for the embrace of the other.

*Mark Calder is anthropologist at the University of Aberdeen and lived and researched in Bethlehem for a long time.*

## “EVERYBODY CAN SAY THE LORD’S PRAYER IN ARABIC“

### Coptic Christians in the Western diaspora

The Coptic Bishop Gabriel describes the people in his diocese as a “wonderful mixture of two cultures“. For young people, German is their mother tongue and Austria is their homeland. “When another attack is made on Copts in Egypt, they experience it very intensively.“

**The word “Coptic“ comes from the Greek and means Egyptian. How Egyptian are the Coptic Christians in Austria?**

The origin of the word “Coptic“ from the Greek is incomplete. The actual origins go back to the Pharaonic “Ka-Ptah“, the name of an ancient Egyptian deity. The Greeks then took this word to describe people from the Nile and in fact the English word “Egyptian“ is also derived from it.

**If the word “Coptic“ alone refers back to the cultural heritage of Egypt, how do the Copts in your diocese feel: more Austrian or more Egyptian?**

It’s a wonderful mixture of two cultures – the Copts in Austria are loyal to the society here, but they still love Egypt and feel responsible for the people there. In our Sunday school work, children from an early age learn a lot about the Coptic Church, the Bible and the Christian faith. Our Sunday school teachers teach this in ways which are often more detailed and more suitable for children than would be the case in Egypt.

**Do young people still speak Arabic?**

The young people in Austria today are the second generation of Copts and they speak

German, even when they speak to each other. It is their language. Many are able to speak the Egyptian dialect, but few of them learn Modern Standard Arabic.

**Do you regret that?**

Of course it’s great when young people learn Arabic, but we do not want to exert any pressure. I myself preach in Arabic as well as in German. They all learn the Lord’s Prayer in German and Arabic and the liturgical chants are in Coptic anyway.

**In the past few years, many Christians have left the Middle East. Some churches, for example the Chaldean Church in Iraq, refer to emigration as poison for the church out of fear that the church could die. What does the Coptic Church feel about emigration?**

The Coptic Church is not as affected by emigration as other churches in the Middle East. World-wide there are 15 million Copts, of which only two million live outside Egypt. Among the Armenians, this proportion is exactly the opposite: only 3 million Armenians live in Armenia. 12 million live in the diaspora. The present government in Egypt is making every effort to achieve the equality of all people in the country, but despite this there are still some groups among the population who hate the Copts. This is shown by the murder of Copts in the first month of this year. But all in all, there are not as many Christians leaving Egypt as for example Iraq or Syria. In the last five years, only 250 Copts have come to Austria where there are 10,000 Copts living today.

**What must families keep in mind to preserve their identity in the diaspora?**

Education plays the greatest role. Knowing where you come from is very important in order to develop awareness for the overall context.

**What does the Church do to preserve Coptic identity?**

In the Coptic Church children are baptised in the first few months of their lives and from that point in time, they are full members of the Church. At the age of three, they start Sunday school where they learn religion in a way which is appropriate for their age and they also learn music or art. When they get older, we also organise conferences where the children come to us in the monastery and participate in the life of the monks. Young people are allowed to take on responsibility early on. We are confident that they can organise many things themselves. But another important thing is that the priests keep contact with the families and visit them regularly.

**In the Coptic Church the concept of martyrdom plays an enormous role. The question of whether Copts are willing to give up their lives for their faith in case of doubt is all the more present for Copts living in Egypt than for those living in the West. Sooner or later, won't the world-wide Coptic community split into two groups?**



Photo: Coptic Diocese in Austria

**Bishop Gabriel (centre) during a service in Vienna.**

I don't think this split will happen. When something happens in Egypt, the Copts living in Austria experience it very intensively. They pray for the victims and make donations for the surviving relatives. Can anybody say today whether he or she is really safe from terror?! That threat is increasing even in Europe.

*Interviewed by Katja Dorothea Buck.*



Mitri Raheb (Pub.)

**Shifting Identities:  
Changes in the Social,  
Political, and Religious  
Structures in the Middle  
East**

Diyar Publisher  
Bethlehem 2016

288 pages, 15,50 US dollars

available from international book-shops

**A constant dynamic open-ended process**

The issue of identity is one of the key topics in the ongoing globalisation age. More and more people are asking themselves who they and the community around them actually are and what makes them different from “the others”. Often they look back to the past but despite all attempts at idealising their own roots, they discover in most cases that identity is a constant dynamic and never-ending process; in its “pure state”, a separate identity has hardly ever existed.

The Diyar Consortium, of which the Bethlehem pastor Dr. Mitri Raheb is President, was on the right track when it held a conference on “Shifting Identities” in the Middle East in Cyprus in 2015 and published the proceedings the following year. The historical contributions alone (Raheb, Maggiolini) describe the complexity of Christian identity formation in the Middle East since the Ottoman Empire. The wide range of topics includes specific issues such as the attitudes of Palestinian Christians to the future status of Jerusalem (Busko), the highly flexible self-definition of Syrian Orthodox Christians in Bethlehem between “Syriac” and Palestinian polarities

(Calder), the problem of military service and an “Aramaic” identity of Christians in Israel (Dronkers), the “acculturation” of Christian-Arab young people in Israel compared to their Jewish and Muslim contemporaries (Munayer), the historical “transculturation” of Protestants in Lebanon (Zeuge-Buberl) and the emergence of feminist initiatives, *ibid.* (Chrabieh). Facets which look far beyond the Arabian Middle East are shown by the life journey of an Armenian Christian (Jebejian), the emergence of a new Pentecostal Christianity in Iran (Rzepka) and the significance of the religious self-awareness of Arab Christian refugees on social transformation in Sweden (Fahlgren). Psychological (Khadra) and theological (Abu Mrad) aspects are two of the highlights in the book. What is remarkable is the final contribution by the Syrian Armenian systematic theologian Sylvie Avakian, who grew up in Lebanon and currently lives in Germany. She demands a deconstruction of traditional Christian identity in the Middle East. This would be the only way to prevent the need to define the identity of the other, *viz.* the Muslim counterpart, from the outside and this would be the only way towards a forward-looking dialogue.

The book is hard reading in parts, but the plethora of differentiations constitutes a treasure trove which can be drawn from in a world that has become difficult to comprehend.

*Uwe Gräbe*

## ORDER OF MERIT OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY FOR KLAUS SCHMID

**Stuttgart/Berlin (EVS).** The Chairman of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), the Reverend Klaus Schmid, has been awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. This was decided by the Federal President shortly before Christmas. Klaus Schmid is honoured for his work in the education of disadvantaged children and young people at the Schneller schools in the Middle East for over 50 years and for building many relationships between Germans, Lebanese and Jordanians. Schmid stayed for long periods of time at the schools. From 1974 to 1980, he continued to support the work from Germany as Middle East Liaison Officer of the EMS and Chairman of the EVS. When he entered the service of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Wuerttemberg in 1980 – first as deacon and later as pastor – he continued to serve in the EVS as association member, then member of the Executive Board and since 1997 as Chairman. The Schneller Magazine congratulates Reverend Klaus Schmid on receiving this high honour.



Photo: EMS/Buck

Klaus Schmid has been actively engaged in Schneller work for over 50 years.

## PRIZE MONEY FOR THE SCHNELLER SCHOOLS

**Stuttgart (EVS).** Berenike Metzler has donated part of the prize money she won for her doctorate thesis on Islamic studies to the Schneller work. Metzler, who was in Beirut several years ago with the EMS “Study in the Middle East” (SiMO) programme, is especially familiar with the work at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS). The Bavarian Academy of Sciences bestowed on her the Max Weber Award at the beginning of December. 2000 Euro of this now go to the JLSS where new games equipment in the playground behind the girls’ dormitory is urgently needed. Metzler’s doctorate thesis bears the title “Understanding the Qur’an – The Kitab Fahm al-Qur’an of the Harith bin Asadal Muhasibi”.

## 500 SCHOOLS FOR THE REFORMATION

**Khirbet Kanafar (JLSS).** The Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon is part of the world-wide project “500 Protestant schools world-wide celebrate 500 years of Reformation”. In the meantime, the number has grown from 500 to well over 650 Protestant schools which are now interlinked over an online platform. Both teachers and pupils can network all over the world and develop activities on the Reformation together. “The global school project clearly shows the global effects of reformatory education impulses and that education is a vital key to independence,” says Birgit Sendler-Koschel, head of the education department of the Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and convenor of the international steering group.



## APPRECIATION FOR TIRELESS COMMITMENT

### Educators fly to Cyprus

Together with Dorothee Beck, nine educators and the head of the boarding home at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) spent a few days in Larnaka in October. The reason for the trip to Cyprus was not only further training. The stay was meant for the educators to spend time together in a relaxed atmosphere and enjoy some rest.

No money in the world can compensate for the work which educators perform for children in the boarding home at the JLSS. They are the first point of contact for the children who can come to them with all their needs and fears at any time of the day and night. Their task is to ensure peace and harmony among the children and they share their joys and successes with them. This is why George Haddad, Director of the JLSS, has long held the wish to say a special thank-

you to the employees in the boarding home for their tireless commitment and work. A five-day study trip to Cyprus was finally organised in autumn last year.

The agenda was kept informal on purpose with units on educational subjects planned on only three mornings. The afternoons, evenings and the departure day were kept free for the educators to rest and relax. We had already dealt with the subject of "Basic needs" in two workshops held at the school. On the first morning on Cyprus, the colleagues were asked to cast their minds back to the phase in their lives corresponding to the age of their boarding children. I requested them to draw a "map" and mark the important and positive places, things and persons. I asked myself in particular how the two young male colleagues would handle this request. Did they ever have to do something like this?

The evaluation was one of the most personal I have ever experienced so far with this group. What came out very clearly was how strongly their childhood is linked to agriculture in the Beqaa valley. I drew relationships between their strong, positive memories and specific basic human needs. For example there was playing and camaraderie on the fields during the harvest. And the young colleague who was responsible for the goat herd while she was out on the meadow in her young years experienced a little bit of freedom and independence there.

The aim of the unit was to improve their understanding of the needs of our boarding children by recalling personal



Work in small groups work with a sea view



experiences. I gave an example. “When I observe the boys mopping near the stairs, it only looks like work at first. But then I quickly notice they are just getting rid of excess energy and they enjoy working with buckets of water.” Finally, we split up into small groups to think about ways of improving educational work at the JLSS – both from a personal viewpoint and from the children’s perspective.

On the other two days, we defined the meaning of the terms “discipline” and “authority” and discussed the positive and negative aspects associated with them. We spoke about positive forms of authority and about “authoritarian authority” which has a rather destructive effect and does not promote relationship building.

In the afternoons, we went outside in small groups – on walks along the promenade in search of a café selling Arabic (and not Turkish or other) coffee. One group took the bus to the coastal town of Agia Napa, others went on a tour of the town and surroundings to learn something about the island’s cultural history. We enjoyed the evenings in mild temperatures sitting cosily together at the restaurant or in a street café.

That was not the only thing they mentioned later when I asked the colleagues what they thought the highlight of the trip was. “It was so good to see another country,” said one colleague and added she also enjoyed the workshops and just sitting and talking together. “Yes,” agreed another colleague. “We received new information. Although we knew most of it already, but a lot was still new.” And another colleague said that the air on Cyprus was simply refreshing. Yes, a change of air did us all a lot of good!



Photo: JLSS/Souad Boutros

A party of travelling colleagues

*Dorothee Beck is educational adviser at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School and at the National Evangelical Church in Beirut.*

*The trip was financed by the Schneller Foundation of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools.*

## A FOOTBALL FIELD WITH PEACE POTENTIAL

**Large donation makes a long-cherished dream come true**

**The Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon has a new football pitch. It is not just any old field. In fact it is the first football field in the Bekaa valley built to FIFA standards. In the middle of March, it has been inaugurated during a German-Lebanese friendship game between a team of deacons from the Heilbronn Prelature and a team selected from pupils and employees working at the JLSS.**

**Y**ou don't have to be a passionate football fan to go into raptures when you see the new field behind the workshops. There can be no more beautiful sight than the deep green of the artificial grass and the red cinder of the surrounding running track pitched against the blue sky above the Bekaa valley and the beige of the mountains in the background. And when the picture includes a group of exuberant children running after a ball, even the hardest couch potato will have to admit that this football field is an excellent gift for the children and young people at the JLSS. But it is not only for them. "We want to give youth clubs in the area the opportunity to play football here," says Reverend George Haddad. He admits it has been a long-cherished dream to have a field like this one.

Although a lot of football is played in Lebanon, the fields on which football is at all possible are few and far between, especially in the more rural area of the Bekaa valley. So far there has been no field which has come anywhere near to meeting professional requirements. The new

football field at the JLSS even meets the standards of the World Football Association FIFA. The school now has something which makes it stand out among all the other schools and institutions in the area. This is quite important for an institution which lives from trust and its reputation among the population.

The new field also opens up a whole range of new opportunities to carry out the Schneller idea. It goes without saying that this is where Syrian refugee children and their Lebanese classmates can play football – and it is an important step towards integrating them into the community. But Haddad wants to go one step further than the internal school context. "We can organise tournaments between various local clubs and groups with people who come from different religious communities," he says. "We have many different contacts to clubs in the neighbouring



Photos: EMS/Buck

**There is no better place for playing sports in the fresh air**

villages and towns through the children, young people and employees at the school.”

But first and foremost, the field is meant for the pupils at the JLSS. And they can hardly wait for the next sports lesson since the clean artificial turf is ideal for gymnastics in the fresh air, besides football and other running games. Those who can only look on obviously become a little envious. That’s what the apprentices at the workshop felt because sports are no longer part of their curriculum. Shortly after the football pitch was ready in the autumn and the first pupils were allowed to play on it, the apprentices reported to the director and asked if they could be allotted time on the football field and this was granted to them.

The story behind the existence of the sports pitch as it exists today actually has a sad background. The son of an elderly couple from south-west Germany died quite unexpectedly from a heart attack at the end of 2015. As he was single, his par-

ents inherited his entire assets. “We have what we need and our daughter and her family are well off,” says the father. This is why they looked out for a meaningful project to put the money to sustainable use. They were already long familiar with Schneller work and they found the plan to build a large football pitch at the JLSS a good idea. “It benefits all the children who live there,” says the mother.

The pitch is due to be officially inaugurated at the middle of March. The couple will then travel to Lebanon for the first time and watch the German-Lebanese friendship game between a Schneller team and Heilbronn deacons who will be on a study trip to Lebanon at the time. A Dutch pastor who has been living in Lebanon for some time will assume the role of impartial referee.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*



air than the new football field at the JLSS.

## „THE RIGHT CHEMISTRY“

### Church's finance officer assists with reorganisation at the TSS

**Erwin Ritte will be providing his assistance in financial and administration matters to the Director of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman until the summer. The 64 year old who lives near Kassel not only has a wealth of professional experience, he is also very passionate about ecumenical co-operation.**

It could be called a stroke of luck. After working for decades in church administration, a person goes into retirement and makes the following offer to long-standing colleagues at the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS): “If you ever have something for me, you can send me off.” The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS), which is member of the EMS, didn't need to be told twice and immediately asked Erwin Ritte whether his offer also covered working at the TSS in Amman. The 64 year old had been ecumenical co-worker in South Africa from 1980 to 1996 and then held several functions in church administration in Germany. From 2003 to 2015, he was finance officer for the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck. In this function he also sat for many years on the EMS finance committee.

For this reason he already knows that things had not been going very well for the TSS for quite some time due to a poor financial situation, dilapidated infrastructure and long overdue personnel decisions. “It's no wonder that everything is the way it is. They had no director for nearly three years,” says Ritte, who knows from his many years of professional

experience that institutions without a manager quickly run into trouble. “The important thing is that the school now has a director and that he, together with the diocese in Jerusalem, has already taken the first steps towards reorganisation.”

Another important thing in such an assignment is the right chemistry. But that's no problem: Director Khaled Freij and Erwin Ritte hit it off right from the start during his first visit to the school in Amman at the end of November. “We have the same sense of humour and there is no need for any pretence between the two of us,” says Ritte. He's not at all bothered about the fact that he is “only” the director's assistant. “I'm used to working in a collegial atmosphere.” It also suits him that his contract is limited to six months since it also allowed his wife to accept the time spent in Jordan. Ritte even says, “I can accept interim results if they are going in the right direction.” He is prepared to work towards this until the end of July and prepare the way until the TSS hires a longer-term ecumenical employee.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*



**Erwin Ritte and his wife Edith during a visit in Amman last November**

## COSY WARMTH FOR LITTLE MONEY

New heating system at the Schneller school saves costs and energy

After three and a half years, Rolf Bartel has finished modernising the heating system at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon. “It would be a good thing if local craftsmen could be instructed more in maintaining the system,” says the heating engineer from Waiblingen.

The first time that Rolf Bartel was at the JLSS on behalf of the Schneller Foundation was in February 2013 to assess the extent and potential saving of a modernisation. “Appalling conditions” are what he found when he first inspected some of the boiler rooms. None of the pipes were insulated. “A heat loss of 20 per cent,” says the heating engineer who works for the Waiblingen public utilities. He also came across boilers which had not existed in Germany for several decades. But this was exactly the contrast that fascinated him. “In Germany we work at achieving savings in the per thousand range. In Lebanon on the other hand you can achieve two digit improvements using relatively simple methods,” he explains.

Since then, Bartel has spent a week at the school once or twice a year to implement the project step by step with local craftsmen. The heating systems have now been modernised in five of the seven buildings on the school grounds. He managed to reuse many of the parts, such as the boiler in the guest house which was almost new but completely oversized. “It was like choosing a Ferrari to drive in a 30 km/h zone.” Today, the boiler not only supplies the guest house with heat but also the day school and another building.



Photo: EMS/Buck

Rolf Bartel in one of the boiler rooms in the cellar

The solar system also operates more efficiently. Very often it used to switch itself off around midday because it produced too much hot water which was not used. Bartel installed buffer tanks capable of storing hot water until it is finally used, which usually happens in the evening hours, especially in the boarding home of the JLSS when the children and young people take a shower.

Officially, the modernisation of the heating system at the JLSS is completed. The costs are borne by the Schneller Foundation. “The main thing that is important now is for the local craftsmen to learn how to maintain the system properly so that it can keep going,” says Bartel. He had great fun working with the local people. “They were a great team. Where else do you get an applause when a heating system finally starts running?!”

*Katja Dorothea Buck*



## WITH COURAGE AND HUMILITY

### George Tamer about challenges in the interreligious dialogue

**The Annual General Assembly of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) is not only a forum for exchanging information, it is very often a commitment to the concept of interreligious dialogue, which at times such as these has become more important than ever. A look back at the 13th November 2016.**

**I**t was only a few days after Donald Trump unexpectedly won the presidential elections in the United States that the EVS convened its Annual General Assembly in Stuttgart-Vaihingen. In the sermon which he delivered at the worship service, the deacon of the City of Stuttgart, Sören Schwesig, bridged the gap between the Schneller schools and the world political stage by saying that Schneller work is “an alternative concept to what we are experiencing at the present time. People are allowing themselves to be guided by fear of the future and foreigners; nationalism is on the rise again and walls are being built,” said Schwesig. “In such a climate tinged with danger, it is a refreshing change to remind ourselves of the work of the Schneller schools where people first recognise the other as a brother or sister.” Schwesig took the sermon from Romans 8, elaborating on the Christian concept of hope which even the greatest suffering cannot wipe away. “Our world needs this hope and the Schneller schools are a good example of how hope can be lived.”

During the keynote speech in the afternoon, the central topic was interre-

ligious dialogue and the EVS found a competent and experienced speaker in George Tamer, Professor for Oriental Philology and Islamic studies at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg. Tamer started his speech by referring to the origins of the Syrian Orphanage which took in children whom their parents had lost due to confessional wars and then reminded the audience of the fate of unaccompanied refugees in Germany. “Humanity has deeper roots than religious affinity,” said Tamer. “If we fail to integrate these young



Photo: EMS/Buck

**Professor George Tamer in conversation with the EVS chairman Rev. Klaus Schmid.**



people, it will be a serious problem for them and for our society.”

Religion is an important factor when it comes to integrating refugees. “The ethnic and confessional diversity of Muslims who come to us must be taken into consideration,” he said. We should continually ask ourselves the question what kind of Muslims we are speaking about: are they Muslims with a Turkish or Arabic background; conservative or secular Muslims; German-speaking Muslims; or are they still learning German; are they Muslims who are successful in business or who have failed; or Muslim women who wear headscarves or not. “Islam has as many faces as followers in Germany. It is not a monolithic block,” said Tamer, who himself stems from Lebanon.

Another challenge is the question of how we deal with foreigners, also from a theological viewpoint. “Can we accept that for Muslims the Holy Qur’an is God’s revelation?” asked Tamer, posing the rhetorical question and then answering it himself immediately. “Christians are called upon to deal with Muslims openly and creatively, to break open the capsule of the ego and approach the other. Islam is not a foreign body but a tile that fits into the multicoloured mosaic pattern in Germany.”

However, interreligious dialogue should not be superficial or evoke an illusory entity. “Religions only have a harmful effect when they do not recognise the diversity of religions,” said Tamer. Dialogue needs firmly established knowledge about one’s own faith and also a willingness to encounter the other at eye level. Courage and humility must go hand in hand whenever there is a meeting with a

foreign culture. “It is vital to represent one’s own culture with self-confidence, but at the same time accept with humility that no claim can be made to possess a monopoly on the truth,” said Tamer in conclusion.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## INFORMATION

*2015 was a successful year for the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS). There was a further increase in income from single donations and from parish collections. The EVS was entrusted with donations amounting to 685,000 Euro in 2015 (of which 133,000 Euro came from the opening worship at the Kirchentag in Stuttgart). In 2014, income from donations was just under 487,000 Euro. In light of the good results from donations, EVS treasurer Reinhold Schaal said, „It seems that people appreciate what we are doing. We must pass on the theme of hope.“*

*The next Annual General Assembly will take place in Stuttgart-Botnang (Church of Nicodemus) on 22 October 2017. Further details will be announced in the next issue of the Schneller Magazine. All members will receive a separate invitation closer to the date.*

## WHAT BECAME OF IMAM

**A story full of hope from the Schneller school**

**What would have become of Imam if it had not been for the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS)? There can be no answer to this question but one thing is clear – today, the girl is taking care of her own life.**

When I was at the JLSS in November 2009 to research the jubilee publication “Learning to live peace”, I accompanied a girl who was living at the school to her home. I wanted to know more about her family background. Iman (her name was changed even in the first article) had just turned twelve years old. It was her sixth year at the JLSS.

It was a long way home and we had to take several shared taxis until we reached the small house somewhere in the fields of the Bekaa valley. The family lived in two rooms. There was no bathroom and not even a table or chairs. There were a couple of mattresses and sofas along the walls. The small oil stove could only heat one room. Iman had no girlfriends there since the hut was so far away from anywhere. “We have a barbie doll, a jigsaw puzzle and a teddy bear,” she said at the time.

The mother was happy that her daughter was attending the Schneller school. She couldn’t help her in anything herself anyway. She told me then that the only difficulty was finding the money to pay for the fares to and from school. This money made a large dent in the family’s budget which was so very small. But it was worth it, said the mother, her daughter should one day be better off.

When I said good-bye to Imam then, I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. With all the self-confidence in the world, she said she would like to become an astronaut.

This stayed in my memory all these years and when I returned to the school in November 2016, exactly seven years later, I asked after Iman and what had become of her. Her younger sister who is now also living at the JLSS told me that Iman had graduated from the Schneller school and was now studying on a grant at the Hariri University in the Beqaa valley. She had chosen to study economics.

*Katja Dorothea Buck*



**A good school education secures a better future.**

## IBRAHIM AZAR BECOMES THE NEW BISHOP

**Jerusalem (ELCJHL).** The Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) has elected Jerusalem pastor Ibrahim Azar to become successor to Bishop Munib Younan who is retiring at the beginning of 2018 after twenty years in office. Azar has been pastor at the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem for nearly 30 years and that is where he will be installed as the new bishop in January next year. In addition, for the past two years, he has been chairman of the recently established church court of the ELCJHL. He studied theology in Munich. The ELCJHL is organised into six parishes in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour and Amman, Jordan. Originally the ELCJHL emerged from the work of German Protestants in the Holy Land.



Photo: EMS/Gräbe

**Uwe Gräbe and Ibrahim Azar have known each other for many years.**

## IN FAVOUR OF A CULTURE OF TOLERANCE

**Baghdad/Mosul (RV/UNHCR).** On the occasion of the reopening of 30 schools in East Mosul at the end of January, Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael Sako made an

appeal to purge curricula and school books from all “poisonous traces of hatred” in order to combat extremism and terrorism and to instigate a culture of tolerance, modernism, maturity and openness. In light of the multicultural and multireligious structure of Iraq, it is necessary to promote “a reconciliation between various communities like in South Africa”. The aim must be to achieve a civilian and democratic state based on the equality of all citizens irrespective of their religion or ethnicity.

The opening of the schools means that 16,000 schoolchildren can again return to school, said the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Under the rule of the Islamic State some schools had remained closed for two years and the majority of girls were barred from access to education. As soon as the security situation permits, 40 more schools will open their doors to a total of 40,000 girls and boys over the coming weeks. Many school buildings had been used for military purposes or severely damaged during the conflicts, said the UNHCR.

In the meantime, the Chaldean Patriarch sees positive signals in the behaviour of Muslims towards Christians. For example, local authorities in the Province of Najaf appealed to Muslims to celebrate the Christmas festivities together with Christians. He also pointed out that the Ministry of Religious Affairs had banned imams from preaching sermons inciting hatred against Christians. Extremism and hate speeches had become “a disturbing phenomenon” all over the world, said Sako.

## ECUMENISM ON DIFFICULT TERRAIN

### Crises burden relationships between East and West

**When war and terrorism define the lives of some people and others have to face up to refugee crises of historical proportions and political upheavals, misunderstandings apparently turn into a stress test. This is what happened at a conference of Middle East Evangelical churches in Beirut at the end of November.**

The outcry was totally unexpected. “I want to finally see action and not just listen to analyses.” Haroutune Selimian, Pastor at the Armenian Evangelical Bethel Church in Aleppo, had stood up immediately after a panel discussion which had been talking about the topic of building bridges between the Middle East and the West. Martin Pühn, Member of the Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) responsible for the Middle East, had just spoken about the increased awareness among the German population concerning the plight of Christians in the Middle East as a result of the flood of refugees and that the churches in the EKD had started discussing more about the issue of Christian presence in the Middle East. This invoked an emotional response from Selimian. Over the past few years, his parish had lost two thirds of its members, either through bombs or emigration. “We are living in war. People are crying out for help. They are looking for direction. What we need is not only material help, we need Christians who really feel connected to us,” he said and quickly added that this did not mean that Europe should simply open its doors to let refugees in from the Middle East. “This

would bleed our region even more,” he said and sat down.

There have already been many conferences on East-West dialogue such as the recent one held by the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC) and in general the opportunities and problems have been objectively analysed and diplomatically and cleverly presented. However the sharp words levelled by Middle East Christians against their Western partners are new. They are expressions of their disappointment and frustration about what they see as the hesitancy of Western churches to take action. “Politicians and churches in the West are always saying how concerned they are about what is happening in the Middle East. But we see no sign that they are actually doing anything about it,” said Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and President of the Lutheran World Federation. “What we expect from our worldwide partners is that they stand by our side as brothers and sisters,” he said.

But what does that mean exactly? Church workers dealing with Middle East matters in Germany have long been wrestling with this problem. Uwe Gräbe, Middle East Liaison Secretary at the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) and EVS Managing Director, also spoke openly about this at the conference in Beirut. He referred to the so-called Urgent Appeal which the Evangelical churches in Syria and Lebanon published a good two years ago, declaring a state of emergency and requesting help from their partners all

around the world. “We have repeatedly asked exactly what we should do: whether we should accept more refugees, support a military intervention, or whether there is a need for a protection zone for Christians or how else we can provide help. But we never received a clear answer,” he said.

This statement alone made many Middle East church delegates furious. If people in Germany reproach them for being unable to speak with one voice, they are applying double standards. Unanimity did not exactly exist all the time in German churches either. This was the tone of comments made during one coffee break discussion. The very existence of churches in the Middle East was under threat. It was unfair to blame the victims of the crisis.

In view of the many misunderstandings and frustrations it is more important than ever to remember the tradition of bridge

building. “Building bridges only brings fruit when someone is prepared to go over to the other side,” said Paul Haidostian, President of the Armenian Evangelical Haigazian University in Beirut. Even in the figurative sense, bridges needed a solid foundation and strong pillars on both sides if they wanted to bear the burden. “Partnership means placing oneself in the other person’s shoes. If we are not prepared to do that, it won’t work.”

*Katja Dorothea Buck*



Middle East and Western church delegates deep in a difficult discussion

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

### Schneller Magazine 4-2016

Many thanks for sending on the impressive articles and reflections. It is a valuable read. I am willing to translate parts into Hungarian for publication on our website so that our church members can also be “sensitised” and can obtain credible firsthand information and impressions from the Middle East.

*Reverend Balázs Ódor, ecumenical liaison  
officer of the Reformed Church in  
Hungary, Budapest*

As you know I have been connected with the EMS and EVS for many years. During a parish trip in the 1990s, I visited the Schneller school in Amman and during my study visit at the NEST in Beirut in 2005, I visited the Schneller school in the Bekaa valley in Lebanon. I would like to maintain this connection after my retirement as ecumenical pastor from Wiesbaden. As before, I always like reading the Schneller Magazine. The articles from the Middle East about Christmas in 2016 were very impressive. Thankfully they contained no platitudinous morality. Admittedly I ask myself how I can allow myself any Christmas joy in view of the atrocities. Talar Marashlian from Aleppo tries to show

the way. Very brave! What is also helpful is the comparison between fear and joy in Munther Isaac’s Christmas sermon from Bethlehem. Thank you for the compilation.

*Rev. Klaus Endter (ret.), Wiesbaden*

I have read the last issue of the Schneller school magazine. I find it stands out from the many publications which parishes receive since it contains so much background information as well as appealing and surprising theological insights.

*Rev. Florian Link, Bad Cannstatt*



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

**Obituary**

The following dearly departed has left the circle of friends of the work of the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS):

**Marion Krauß, Fellbach**

The Schneller Magazine is also available in German and can be read online

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# SCHNELLER

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

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I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.

Ezekiel 36:26



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