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# SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



AND HOW WILL WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR?  
THE CHILD IN THE MANGER AND THE MIDDLE EAST 2016



EVS Evangelical Association  
for the Schneller Schools

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## CHRISTIANS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Dear Readers,

“Why don’t you write us something reflective from the Holy Land for Christmas?” That’s what church newspapers from Germany have asked me to do now and then until a few years ago. But the fact is, I was never able to fulfil this request. That’s because Christmas in Israel and Palestine is either non-existent or loud - hardly reflective.

Christmas has now disappeared from the public eye where there are no (more) Arab Christians. But wherever a large number of local Christians live – in Bethlehem or Nazareth – Christmas is loud and to Western Christians, often completely devoid of melody; for example, the main hallmark of Christian scout groups play the drums and bagpipes. As if Christians wanted to say, “Look here! There may be so few of us, but we’re still here. We belong to this country and there’s no way you can ignore us!”

Does this still apply now, six years after the start of the “Arabellion” and after years of murdering and the exodus from Syria and Iraq? Above all, where does this still exist in the Middle East? And in view of the traumatic experiences of the past few years, how can Christians still celebrate Christmas in the countries where Christianity has its origins? We asked people in the Middle East. You can read their replies in this issue.

One of the first theological books I had to read as a grammar school pupil in religion classes was the booklet called “Ein Flüchtlingskind (A Refugee Child)” by Helmut Gollwitzer and Pinchas Lapide, published in 1981. It contains an insight which is even more pertinent today than ever. The fact is that what happened in the manger in Bethlehem can only be completely understood against the background of flight and expulsion. So let’s all listen to what our brothers and sisters in the Middle East have to say.

With this in mind, the entire editorial team wishes you a very peaceful Christmas.

Yours,



Uwe Gräbe



## WITH HEARTS AND EARS OPEN

This issue gives a voice to people who are spending Christmas in the Middle East, many under difficult and very difficult conditions, year after year. If we are honest about it, we do not really want to hear very much about suffering at all at Christmas. We prefer to think about a cosy manger and stable instead of a cold

and damp cave in Bethlehem. We want to be able to reflect at Christmas. We don't want to have a bad conscience when we look forward to being together with our loved ones and to giving and receiving presents.



Photo: Wikimedia

No room in the inn – “Search for shelter”, 19th C., attributed to Carl Rahl

How do we deal with this dilemma? This question arises with new urgency and intensity when we view the events in Syria. We are stunned by the helplessness of the international community in view of the barbaric happenings in Syria. Recently, Peter Harling, journalist and expert on Syria, described how we numb ourselves with empty phrases which provide no solution to the conflict but only represent a solution for our own inner conflict: calling for an end to the violence or uttering paraphrases about the intolerable atrocities which are reported every day. According to Harling, we increasingly stop people in the region from being heard and we stop ourselves from having to listen to them. People knock on every door with their story but they find no shelter.

*“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

*(Luke 2:7)*

We need Christmas. We need the message of Christmas and the rituals during the festive season which we have come to love and cherish. This is not escapism. Quite the opposite, it is a source from where we draw strength. It reminds me of an old Friedrich Gundolf song which is supposed to be one of Sophie Scholl’s favourites:

*“Close your eyes and ears  
a while to the din of time  
that you cannot heal, but  
only heal where your heart  
resides.”*

*(Friedrich Gundolf)*

It means we have failed when we take time off for ourselves, our families or feel joy for the birth of Christ. The challenge starts when we plunge back into everyday life and surround ourselves with the bustle which allows us to block out whatever is unpleasant. I want to try to find the time and strength to listen to people and let them tell me their stories, just as this issue does. Not to turn a deaf ear to these stories because they weigh us down and place seemingly impossible tasks on us. Instead, we should open our hearts and provide these people with a shelter, not turn them away since this is also the message of Christmas.

*“Glory to God in the highest  
heaven, and on earth peace  
among those who he favours.”*

*(Luke 2:14)*

*Gerhard Schlaudraff works for the  
German Foreign Office. This contribution  
is a purely personal opinion.*

## CHILD IN THE MANGER, WHERE ARE YOU?

When the good news of the Arabian Spring is lost in the darkness

**I**t's Advent! Our joy and enthusiasm know no limits. It seems that people all around the world are preparing themselves for the coming of God's only Son. Shops are full of Christmas stuffs; everyone is excited for shopping, particularly to buy Christmas gifts. TV channels, radio stations and internet pages are full of Christmas programs, pictures, songs and movies in which the nativity story has a central place. Christmas trees are occupying the most visible places of our houses, and the Christmas lights by their irresistible beauty are grabbing the attention and successfully stealing from the time of even the busiest people among us.

Moreover, the Christmas decorations everywhere by their special colors joined with the message of Christmas are miraculously transforming the cold winter season into a warm, colorful and bright spring atmosphere where restoring broken relationships among people becomes a possibility and wishes to gather family members, relatives and friends turn into carefully set plans.

Christmas is coming! Very soon we will celebrate again and announce together: "Emmanuel! God is with us. Emmanuel! Baby Jesus is with us." Isn't this significant?! Baby Jesus is with us! Baby Jesus is with... Baby Jesus is...



Photo: Wikimedia

A woman, a man and a donkey approach Bethlehem on Christmas day 1898 – the photographer of this historical photo apparently wanted to portray Christmas far from the normal bustle of the festive day.

What happened? Where are you Baby Jesus? Suddenly, the smile from my face fades away. Realising that these all were only past nice sweet Christmas memories, I find myself sobbing... soaked in tears. What happened?

"The Spring" came! and... how much I wish to mean that yearly season which comes a few months after Christmas, stays for a while, marvelously transforms the nature and goes away. "Spring" came; the well known "Arab Spring". It came supposedly to bring life and revive our region with what is good, just and free, but instead, as a cold and dreadful Winter, it tore apart the countries, including my beautiful country Syria, through the ugliest forms of war and turned my life and the lives of thousands of people upside-down.

It's Advent, but... shops are closed. The media is full of awful news and scenes of explosions, killings, deaths and destructions. Most houses, if not yet destroyed, are now bared not only from the Christmas trees, lights and decorations but also from their people. Instead of gatherings and reunions, families, relatives and friends are now separated and scattered all over the world; once, an occasion for reconciliation is now prevailed with anger, hatred, revenge and intolerance. It's Advent in "The Spring" yet, it's not colorful; the only color that remained is the red though not on ornaments, but took the shape of an unending flow of human blood. The darkness overwhelmed... and the assuredly announced "Emmanuel!" turned into a constant process of searching for God and to the loud cry of "Where are you Baby Jesus in the midst of all this evil?"

The intensity of this darkness succeeded for a while to conceal the joyful scene of the Nativity story as it is told in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, until the beginning of John's Gospel brought it to sight through his profound interpretation of it. The true light, Baby Jesus Christ, came to the world in the midst of darkness. The light enabled me to see that the images which I have in my mind about Baby Jesus in the manger are only shallow and beautified depictions of the reality. Baby Jesus was born in a manger, a place which isn't cozy, tidy and bright, but unpleasant, dirty, messy, dark and smelly, just like the world around us nowadays.

Where are you Baby Jesus? Emmanuel! You are here with us in our world despite the intense darkness and despite our failure to see you. You are here and ready to walk with us through the darkness and help us overcome it. This is the good news of Christmas in "The Spring". Realizing this, peace beyond my understanding fills my heart and I find myself smiling again. It's the fifth Advent in "The Spring" and I will joyfully wish everyone a "Merry Christmas". Yes! Christmas is merry because God visited us through Baby Jesus and is with us forever no matter what.

*Talar Marashlian, Evangelical theologian, comes from Aleppo, but meanwhile lives in a village on the Bekaa Valley where her family found refuge from the bombs.*

*The young authoress wrote this text in a moment of desperation. Shortly before this issue was printed at the end of October, she wrote, "I couldn't send the article any earlier. My cousin died in Aleppo. It's the fifth death in our family this year."*

## LEFT BEHIND ALONE

### About the yearning for words of peace in war-torn Syria

It's with melancholy that I remember the time when a German Christmas worship service was taken for granted for a small German parish in Damascus. Of course we were a small community but none the less active, especially with our unique bazaar activities. Once a month, the pastor of the German-speaking Beirut parish came from Lebanon to Syria. The worship service always took place in Damascus, in Dar as-Salam, the Convent of the Franciscan nuns. A small devoted community attended the service regularly and there were several visits from workers at the German embassy and companies depending on their interest. The Christmas service was particularly festive. Last time, the pastor in attendance was Reverend Jonas Weiss-Lange who came to Damascus, very often accompanied by his wife Chris Lange. After the outbreak of the war six years ago, however, he was no longer able to carry on this duty, to our great disappointment.

Soon after, the Damascus parish fell apart. Everyone left the country and every person has his or her personal reasons for going away. I was the only one who stayed behind. Since our expulsion by the Al Nusra Front in autumn 2013, my husband and I have lived in Soueida, in the far south of Syria. Almost every day, loud-speakers announce the names of those killed in the fighting, family fathers, sons, etc. That has several impacts. The loss of breadwinners in families increases poverty. Nonetheless, families are embarrassed but do not stand begging on the streets.

The town of Soueida is growing at a

rapid pace because of the massive influx of refugees from every region. At the same time, we have galloping inflation and there is no heating oil or gas and sometimes no petrol. There are frequent electricity cuts. In addition to minor skirmishes, there are frequent kidnappings, often with a fatal outcome, and robberies. Further away in the district there is frequent fighting by conflicting parties. But still, the town has so far been spared from bombardments. Nonetheless the situation is unclear and vague. After the ceasefire was violated, something that was more or less easy to foresee, the last remaining hope dwindled to an almost tiny, imperceptible glimmer.

We more or less number among what are called internally displaced persons. Since our expulsion we have so far attended the Christmas service three times at the Greek Catholic church in Soueida. There is no Evangelical church. Every year, the Christian youth gathers regularly for a trombone concert on the vast churchyard in front of the church. Due to the situation, the service is brought forward to the evening and no longer takes place at midnight as in the past. The sounds ring out over the town; somehow it seems full of hope. The church is packed to the last seat, there are even people all the way back to the church door, standing should to should in the aisles. Many in front of the door are still able to hear the service. Every time, we have met Druze acquaintances and their families there. They also come to the Christmas service and are very impressed by the celebration with its beautiful Christmas decorations, especially



the universal, good, comforting words of the preacher who speaks to Christians and non-Christians alike, mainly of love and the longed-for peace for all people who are of good will.

This year we are especially looking forward very much to these words – peace to all people on Earth. We wish from the bottom of our hearts to hear these words again. But we also have justifiable doubts. The signs are all pointing to storm; the news is alarming: refugees from the north are fleeing again in panic into our region. But we have found a meaningful task. Our project has already been in existence for more than three months - looking after refugee children from nearby camps. Three women teachers are working there with great dedication, but there is still a long way ahead of us.

We have an enormous task before us and if it is granted to us

that we may celebrate a Christmas service again this year, what will we feel when we hear the words "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy..." or even "Peace be on Earth..."? We are all aware, of course, that peace can only mean inner peace, a virtue that we must practice every day but

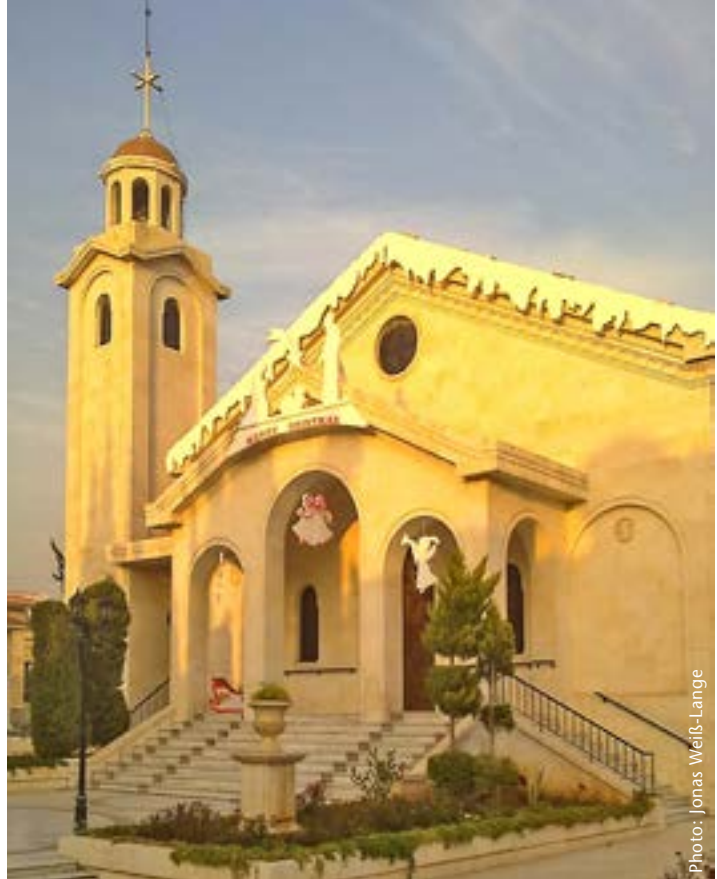


Photo: Jonas Weiß-Lange

**Saint Joseph Church in Hamdanieh decked with Christmas decorations – here German-speaking Evangelical Christians in Aleppo still held a worship service once a month until a few years ago. The photo was taken at the end of 2010, shortly before the outbreak of civil war in Syria. Hamdanieh is in the west of the town and often comes under fire from the rebels**



Photo: Jonas Weifs-Lange

The Christmas scene on a column in a church in the centre of Aleppo. How will Christmas be celebrated in this church this year?

that, so far, we humans have failed miserably at achieving.

Nevertheless we will again set up a Christmas tree which will reach to the ceiling and be covered in nostalgic decorations. It is an artificial tree but looks so deceptively real that many of the Christmas visitors touch it to make sure. Never was Christmas and its message of peace more important for us than in these troubled, dismal times.

*Gabi Conrad-Hamze and her husband came to Damascus in November 1981 and worked for many years at the German Archaeological Institute. The sociologist comes originally from Munich.*

## NEWS

### The German-speaking congregation

*There are only but a few German-speaking Evangelical Christians in Syria. Until a few years ago, they were looked after by the pastor of the German-speaking Evangelical Congregation in Beirut who travelled to Damascus and Aleppo once a month. In Damascus the congregation had its home in the Catholic school of Dar as-Salam, situated next to the church of the Franciscan nuns. The congregation in Aleppo always gathered at Saint Joseph Church in Hamdanieh. Today, the two small parishes no longer exist as such. Firstly the pastor no longer comes from Beirut to Syria any more to hold church services, for safety reasons. Secondly, all but a few Evangelical German-speaking Christians have long departed from the country ravaged by civil war.*

# FROM FEAR TO JOY

## A Christmas sermon from Bethlehem

*"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."*

*(Luke 2:10+11)*

In the Christmas narrative we read about the fear of the shepherds. Imagine the scene, how in the silence and darkness of the night, the shepherds saw this glorious yet sudden vision. They were naturally afraid. Yet I wonder if Luke was alluding to a more general fear that was prevalent in Palestine in Biblical times. We read in his introduction to the birth narrative many references to the yearnings and expectations of the people and how there was a reality of fear. We see this in the hymn of Zacharias in Luke 1 who prayed to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear"

It is safe to say that fear was common in the days when Jesus was born. The people of the land were afraid of their occupiers, the unknown, or that God has forgotten them. They were afraid, and where there is fear, there is despair and slavery. When we are afraid, we become prisoners to our fears, chained in despair and hopelessness.

We see this reality of fear in our world today. Today in Palestine and in the midst of the occupation, many are afraid of the future. In places like Iraq and Syria, where

Christians and other religious minorities are persecuted, the prayer of Zachariah is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago: "...grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear."

Even in places where there is stability we encounter fear. In Europe and North America many are afraid of the refugees and migrants. Politicians are utilizing and encouraging this fear for selfish evil reasons. Because of this fear many Christians are not willing to serve and embrace the refugees, which is as close a thing to being Christ-like and following Jesus' teaching as you could get! Fear is causing many Christians to reject and in some cases hate others! Fear is a reality that is crippling our world today, and at the same time it is a reality that is damaging our Christian witness to that world. Today, maybe more than ever, we need to hear and embrace the words of the angels: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

There are at least three things that the Gospel is telling us today. First, we fear not, because Jesus is born. The message of Christmas should drive fear away. The message that God sent his Son to be born here, to feel our pain and sorrows, and to ultimately carry our sins upon himself on the cross – this message should drive fear away.

"Fear Not", but not because circumstances will change. "Fear Not", not because you should trust in yourself. This is not "self-help". The message is not to



Photo: Uwe Gräbe

**Neither reflective nor peaceful – Christmas day in Bethlehem is loud and full. Christian scout groups play the bagpipes and beat drums full of enthusiasm. Everyone should know Christ is born.**

simply have courage. "Fear Not", because of what God is doing in and through Jesus Christ. Hope and salvation come from without, not from within. My help comes from above, from the Lord".

This is not a statement that the current political reality will change. Rather, a new kingdom reality is breaking through! A dawn of a new era is appearing. Interestingly, a similar statement with almost the same Greek words and sentence structure like the one we find in Luke 2:11 was known in Jesus' times about the birth of Augustus. Was Luke alluding to this? "Fear Not"! The new king is born. It is not Caesar, but Jesus. And his kingdom of love and joy challenges the kingdoms of the fear that dominate our world today.

Second, what is really interesting in the words of the angel is that fear is replaced with Joy – the joy of the Gospel. The opposite of fear is not security, but joy! Joy, not security, replaces fear. The prom-

ise of Christmas is not of security, wealth or comfort, but the joy of the Gospel! The joy of knowing that God dealt with our sins and failures. The joy of realizing that God has remembered his covenant; of realizing that we are not forgotten. The joy of knowing that the baby of Bethlehem is the prince of peace and also the one who "with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (Isaiah 11:4).

Thirdly and finally, this is not a passive or naïve joy. This is not escapism. Joy is active and transformative. The joy of Christmas should transform our world and reality and cause us to be ourselves agents of transformation and change. The shepherds received this joyful news of Jesus' birth and went to Bethlehem and met Jesus and the family, and then returned "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them". Today we are invited to do the same.

Because Jesus is born we are now free to love, serve and worship him. Because he is born we are no longer slaves to our fears. We "fear not", and with joy we love and serve the world. And when we serve with joy, when we are liberated from fear, only then we are able to love and embrace God and others. "We are invited to receive the words of the angels: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people".

*Reverend Munther Isaac is doctor of theology and was until recently Dean at the Bethlehem Bible College. Today he is personal assistant to Bishop Munib Younan and also responsible for congregation work in Bethlehem.*



Photo: Uwe Gräbe

They came from Africa to finally celebrate Christmas at the Nativity Church in Bethlehem.

## WHEN TEARS DROWN ALL FESTIVITIES

**This year, many Christians in Iraq will again celebrate Christmas as refugees**

**Two and a half years ago, there were many pictures of the conquest of Mossul by the Islamic State. But few have remained etched in our memories as much as the video of the weeping Archbishop Mor Nicodemus. It shows the suffering of those who have lost everything.**

The video went viral on Youtube. The Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Mor Nicodemus was asked about the situation of Christians in Iraq at a refugee camp in the north of the country. "There have always been wars in our country but we always prayed in the churches of Mossul and the surrounding region. It's the first time in 1,500 years ..." The Bishop pauses, breaks out in tears and cries, long and silently. In fact, he wanted to say that it was the first time in 1,500 years that no bells would ring in Mossul at Christmas – Mossul was known as Nineveh in the Old Testament. The appalling truth of this fact completely threw him off balance in front of the camera.

2014 is regarded as the bitterest year for Christians in Iraq. At breakneck speed the Islamic State terrorist group conquered one city after the other and all those who failed to fit into their world view were expelled or killed. At that time, 120,000 Christians fled from Mossul in a mad rush. They spent Christmas as refugees in their own country. At the time, the Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael Sako called upon all Chaldean Christians in the country to fast. They were expected to go without food or drink from sunrise to sunset in the

period from 22 to 24 December. They also had to refrain from holding lavish festivities of any kind.

And that at Christmas of all times, one of the most festive and joyous moments in the church calendar. The monstrosity of the warmongers had to be opposed by an equivalent canonical ruling of enormous proportions. Without further ado the Patriarch brought forward the strict three-day Fast of Ba'utha to the Advent and Christmas period. This fasting period normally takes place between Christmas and Ash Wednesday in the calendar of his and other Oriental churches. In the church's tradition the fast is a reminder of the Old Testament story when the Prophet Jonah preached repentance to the people of Nineveh.

Since then, times in Iraq have not turned out for the better. At Christmas 2015, Sako wrote, "This year, we will celebrate the birth of Christ in silence and with tears in Iraq." The situation of the refugees was especially deplorable. Christians were the victims of marginalisation and religious separation. "Nobody could have imagined a catastrophe on such a scale except those who planned this religious cleansing." The community in which Christians used to live together with non-Christians no longer exists. In the meantime, pictures of the Virgin Mary had been distributed in Baghdad and Christian women were called upon to take her as an example and wear a headscarf. Recently, the parliament also passed a resolution that underage Christian children would automatically become Muslims if

one parent converted to Islam. "It's as if our fundamental rights and freedoms no longer apply to us – as if they were reserved for others. All this takes away the joy of celebrating Christmas for us," wrote Sako a year ago.

How will Christians in Iraq celebrate the birth of Christ in 2016? The military recapture of Mosul and the surrounding villages has begun. Perhaps the Islamic State will have been pushed back by Christmas. But what will await those who had to flee from their houses and who had to leave everything behind that was previously their home? Many houses, churches and monasteries have been destroyed. The IS has even razed to the ground Islamic holy places, such as the shrine and mosque of the Prophet Jonah who is also revered by Muslims.

Perhaps Patriarch Sako will repeat his appeal of last year. "We will not give up in the face of this injustice. On the contrary, we remain obliged to our country and we will continue to live out our love for our fellow countrymen, quite simply because they are our brothers. We want peace for Iraq."

*Katja Dorothea Buck*

## DIFFERENT REALITIES AT CHRISTMAS

**Celebrating Christmas in a foreign land gives new meaning to the message**

This year, my Christmas will be classical. By that I mean travelling home to a small town, wrapping up presents, attending worship service at 18.00, enjoying a traditional fricassee meal, talking about the Christmas sermon and then exchanging gifts. My family has developed and preserved this pattern on the 24 December over many years – and I'm really looking forward to it. Christmas means fine food and delicious meals; it means church; it means family, friends and acquaintances; and it means home.

This year, I will appreciate my Christmas even more. Last year at this time, I was in Beirut taking part in an academic year at the Near East School of Theology (NEST). Like most of my fellow students I did not fly back home for Christmas – the flights to Germany, Armenia, Kenya or the USA were expensive and the roads to Syria were not always safe. So we stayed there over the holidays. We made little Christmas "Secret Santa" presents and cooked for each other. Our menu on 24 December consisted of chicken kebab, roast potatoes, pancakes, fruit salad, baguette, kibbeh and my fricassee. In a nutshell, a potpourri of traditional dishes served at Christmas at various places in the world. We prayed together, laughed and told stories about home.

This year, most of us are back with our families. But some are not. They are spending Christmas separated from their families and friends, some of whom live in the fought-over areas of Aleppo or Hassake. Some of my Syrian friends have turned their backs on their home country

and will celebrate Christmas in Canada, Australia or in Germany. What I regarded last year as the loss of a beautiful routine will become a permanent state for them: foreign surroundings, new impressions and a new language. As Christians I hope they will experience companionship in parishes and churches. But at home, they would not only share the faith, they would also be together with familiar people and places and enjoy traditional Christmas meals.

This year, when I am sitting at the 18.00 worship service and later eating my fricassee, I will think about them in particular, about my friends in sweltering Australia or in freezing Canada and my fellow students in Hassake. The nativity story which we will all listen to at different places on this evening will hold different messages for us and will offer something that will connect us wherever we may be. In Syria it will perhaps be the Child who was born in unsafe surroundings and became the Saviour of the world. For refugees in Germany or Canada, it could be the experience of being in a foreign place where expulsion is something that may happen at any time. During our evening meal, we will probably talk about whether there were also shepherdesses on the field. That's all part of the story.

Whatever the differences in our approaches, in the end there is always the hope which is contained in the story of the newborn Christ. This hope is probably easier to accept here in peaceful Germany than in the destroyed city of Aleppo. But it has the potential to act as a connection





Unfortunately there are no photos of the Christmas meal at the NEST. But this photo shows the clash of realities: an Irish and a Finnish military counsellor in Lebanon are celebrating Christmas together by the light of a candle in 2013, while the television in the background is broadcasting pictures from a local Christmas service.

in a foreign country and make uncertainties more bearable.

The experience of the Christmas we shared last year at the NEST gives me the confidence that this will happen. The preparations and the meal on that special evening made us into a tight-knit community for a short time. Without this occasion and without these circumstances, I would not have gained an insight into the realities of Christmas of my fellow students and I would be missing an important dimension to the story. This year, I can think of them and accompany them at my evening dining table at home. Let realities clash and give birth to the new!

*Last year, Philine Lewek took part in the "Studies in the Middle East" (SiMO) programme. She comes from Bernburg in Saxony-Anhalt and is continuing her studies in theology in Marburg.*

## WHERE LANGUAGE IS LIQUID

Retrospective view of the first three months of ArtLounge at the NEST

Sometimes, the right people simply come together at the right moment to turn an idea into a real project. This was exactly the case with the ArtLounge at the Near East School of Theology (NEST). Students and lecturers discover art as an important form of expression.

It still is a small miracle in the making. A female theology lecturer was seeking room to develop the creative potential of her students outside the lecture theatre. A senior pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut realised that free thinking and the courage to express oneself through art forms was only in its infancy in the Lebanese education system. And a teacher from Germany almost thought that her professional interest in art was not in demand in Lebanon at all. In the winter of 2015/16, these three people came together and noticed the sparks fly: the idea of the “ArtLounge” was born.

*“...it’s a place when language is fluid...”*

*Nina*

ArtLounge is a place where students and residents can meet and where people from different cultures come together. At the same time, it’s a chance to be inspired by materials and artistic ideas. And in the end ArtLounge represents a way to compensate for the often “cerebral” demands of studying by losing oneself in “manual” activities once a week.



Wall installation made of wood fibre boards on the the

Around ten people were curious enough to attend the first evening. What they found was rather unfamiliar to most of them: paint rollers, acrylic panels, bottles of liquid paint and everything for colouring, moving across paper and printing. “Print!” is our theme. Soon after, our papers were decorated with fabric structures, imprints of everyday objects as well as toy car wheels. We soon ran out of space to display the prints. Often there’s no time left for a cup of coffee and biscuits - that’s how concentrated and busy we are.

*“Honestly – ArtLounge is the only place at the moment where I can simply let myself be spontaneous...”*

*Aram*

On the following evenings, we turned prints into collages and connected them with wire to make filigree sculptures. On

the three evenings before Whitsun we retraced the biblical miracle of Whitsun, starting with the terms Red (the liturgical colour of Whitsun), Holy Spirit (in his manifestations as wind and fire) and languages, we worked on wood fibre boards and created a piece which would fill a wall of the NEST chapel. During the Whitsun prayer service, Dr. Rima Nasrallah introduced the student residents and guests to the art project using passages from the Bible.

Photo: Rima Nasrallah



me of Whitsun

*"Thank you for the opportunity of experimenting with artistic forms and allowing us to express ourselves."*

*Salam*

"Identity" is another artistic theme which we are pursuing, this time with polystyrene foam cladding which was awaiting disposal. We give them and our group a "face" and work with personal objects and papier mâché. After they are arranged into a large joint work of art, it will become an eye-catcher for our ArtLounge exhibition on the occasion of the graduation ceremony at the NEST in the middle of June.

As the semester nears its end, pressure on the students grows: exam stress and for

those who are graduating especially, the question arises what will happen after their studies. Despite the narrow time frame, we are distinctly aware of how important the ArtLounge has become as a room where participants can unwind and let go. "Actually, I don't have the time but I come for an hour or so - I just need to clear my head..." When this student said this, she was herself in the middle of her final exams and had returned from a short stay in Damascus where she had experienced an extremely painful bereavement in her family. I was lost for words when she told me this. But she experiences art as a chance to deal with everything without having to explain very much.

*"This one evening a week was a blessing for my imagination which wanted to be set free."*

*Mathilde*

Playful curiosity instead of the pressure of performance. And that is exactly what happens and what makes art education so sustainable and valuable: creativity of course finds its own subjects and content. What is free does not remain futile. At the NEST we link art with our personal experiences and our faith. And we're totally impressed by the "results"!

*Dorothee Beck*

*The ArtLounge project was sponsored by the National Evangelical Church in Beirut, the sponsoring church of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School.*



Photo: MECC

**The old and the new Presidium of the MECC: Reverend Habib Badr (3rd f.l.) assumes the office of Bishop Munib Younan (1st f.l.) and will represent the voice of Middle-East Protestants in this body in future.**

## ECUMENICAL OFFICE FOR REVEREND HABIB BADR

**Amman (EVS).** The Senior Pastor of the National Evangelical Church of Beirut (NECB), Habib Badr, is the new Evangelical President of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). He succeeds Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. The MECC, which represents all the churches in the Middle East, elected a new Presidium at its last general assembly in Amman in September. Each of the four major church families sent a delegate to the assembly.

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) congratulated Habib Badr on his election and is delighted that a long-term reliable partner from Schneller work now represents the voice of Evangelical Christians in the Middle East within the ranks of the MECC.

## KEEPING TIES TO THE OLD SCHOOL

**Niagara Falls (SAFA).** A group of former Schneller pupils who now live in North America met in Niagara Falls (Canada) in the middle of June. The Schneller Alumni and Friends Association (SAFA) in North America has the slogan, "To them that much is given much is required". Since the year 2000, members of the SAFA get together once a year to think about how they can support the Schneller schools. In Niagara Falls, they decided that SAFA would like to commit themselves mainly in the field of computer equipment and software training in future. "We are always delighted when we see each other again and exchange memories of our school times at Schneller," reports Aziz Shalaby, spokesman for the SAFA. At the meeting, which members of the family may also attend, they also honour the Schneller alumni in their ranks who have died.



Photo: Aziz Shalaby

**Schneller alumni with members of their families at the annual SAFA meeting in Canada.**

### **On the death of Rudolf Schmalenbach**

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) mourns the loss of Rudolf Schmalenbach who died at the age of 97 at the Herzogsägmühle social welfare village in Peissenberg in the middle of September. Schmalenbach was one of the closest friends of Schneller work and despite his advancing age and increasing frailty he never shied away from travelling to attend the annual meetings of the EVS. Only very few knew the origins of his affinity to the schools. He was born in Mainz in 1919, son of a Jewish mother and a Christian father, and experienced the hostility of the Nazis in his young years. In 1939, his mother sent him to Palestine. At the beginning, he found shelter at the Syrian Orphanage. Later, he worked on a chicken farm in Jordan with his uncle who had previously fled from the Nazis.

Schmalenbach did not escape the fate that all Germans experienced in Palestine as the war began to unfold in Europe: he was interned by the British but was able to declare clearly at a hearing before a British tribunal that he was not a public enemy. He was released in April 1941. He witnessed the founding of the State of Israel as a contemporary. In the early 1950s, he returned to Germany. Right to the end, Schmalenbach observed the political and social developments around him with great attention. When Syrian refugees were housed in his parish last year, he offered his services as translator. He had learnt Arabic during the time he spent at the Syrian Orphanage. The EVS will honour

the memory of Rudolf Schmalenbach as a true friend and supporter.

### **On the death of Rolf Class**

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) mourns the death of its former Chairman and Managing Director, Reverend Rolf Class, who died in Stuttgart at the end of August at the age of 88. In 1980, Class succeeded Reverend Klaus Schmid at the Middle East Liaison Desk of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) (then known as the Association of Churches and Missions in South-West Germany). Despite the communication difficulties which resulted from the civil war in Lebanon which had already lasted five years, he tried to maintain contact with the Johann-Ludwig Schneller School in the Bekaa valley as well as possible. Hartmut Brenner, who was director at the school from 1982, still remembers well how Class tried to support him from Stuttgart. "I am still very thankful for his co-operative thinking and prayers," writes Brenner about Class. The EVS also honours the memory of Rolf Class's commitment to Schneller work.



## A SHATTERED DREAM

### What happened to the Schneller land between Jerusalem and Bethlehem

There was great excitement when a newspaper report appeared in autumn 2011 published by a Palestinian organization for human rights. The City of Jerusalem had announced a land development plan for an undeveloped area on the southern outskirts of the city. One of the possible former owners listed was the Syrian Orphanage.

The district is called “Giv’at Hamatos” today, but the old Arab name is still retained in the name of a street which runs alongside the site: Tabaliyeh – not far from the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, on the right of the main road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and opposite the Mar Elias Monastery. According to the human rights organization, the possible previous owners were requested to claim their title to the land to the Israelis. And one of the possible former owners listed was the Syrian Orphanage!

Immediately after this in November 2011, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) commissioned a Jerusalem church to act on its behalf. At the end of 2014, the EVS then took an Arab-Israeli lawyer to pursue the matter more intensively since the prospects appeared too compelling. In 1935, Hermann Schneller had purchased land on the road to Bethlehem. He planned to move with the Syrian Orphanage to a mainly Christian area. But with the outbreak of World War II, all his plans fell through. The Germans in Palestine were interned by the British and after the State

of Israel was founded in 1948, it was exactly here between Jerusalem and Bethlehem that the barbed wire fences and minefields ran, marking the “Green Line” between Israel and Jordan. In 1952, Hermann Schneller attempted to sell the land through an estate agent in Bethlehem and invest the earnings in the new Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon. But in 1958, he realised with frustration that this had only succeeded with only two or three tiny plots of land. Land in the military restricted area was practically unsellable.

This is where the records of Hermann Schneller end. Could it really be true that all knowledge of this land was then lost and nobody had bothered to keep any records after the military barriers had been taken down in 1967? Our lawyer sifted through the land registry entries in Bethlehem and Jerusalem; in the end, he even gained access to the Jordanian archives in Amman. Plot for plot, it was possible to reconstruct what was actually part of the “Schneller land”. Our mind’s eye already counted sums amounting to millions to which the EVS could lay claim. But then at the beginning of August 2015, a sobering message came from our lawyer: did we know that the EVS had sold a large part of the land to the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem in 1972?

This information led us on the right track – in actual fact, the Schneller Archive in Stuttgart-Möhringen had the correspondence with the Armenian Patriarchate on file. The whole story finally came to light. The land, formerly 210 dunum, i.e.

21 hectares (nearly 52 acres), was originally the joint property of the Syrian Orphanage and a Bethlehem family, and the Syrian Orphanage had a title to a third of the land. In 1966 – i.e. before the 6-day war – the two owners had consented to divide the land by notarial agreement and this was anything but favourable to the EVS. In the end, the EVS only retained title to 45 dunum (4.5 hectares; 11.11 acres).

On behalf of the EVS, the administration of the Evangelical Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem sold 44 dunum to the Armenian Patriarchate at the end of the year 1971/1972. All the transactions took place in the greatest of secrecy. The EVS received a sum of DM 800,000 which was invested in other ways. In the end, all that was left over from the land division was a single plot bearing the number 79. But apparently the land division in 1966 had not taken place according to proper

procedures. After agreement had been reached with the Bethlehem family, the last plot was also sold to the Armenians in 1972/73.

What led us down the wrong path for a long time was the fact that Plot 79 was entered under different owners in two different departments of the Jerusalem Land Registry Office: once under the Armenian Patriarchate and once under the EVS. The sale to the Armenians however is well documented. So any recovery of the Schneller property in Jerusalem remains a shattered dream.

*Uwe Gräbe*



Photo: EMS/Gräbe

**The Schneller land on the southern outskirts of Jerusalem was sold to the Armenian Patriarchate in 1972.**

## PART OF THE HISTORY OF THE COUNTRY OF ISRAEL

### What will become of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem

The chequered history of the former Syrian Orphanage was the topic of an art exhibition and a symposium in Jerusalem this summer. There it was announced that the investor was planning to open a “Museum of Israeli Communities” in the main building.

In actual fact, the organisers of the “Artists’ House” in Jerusalem had only invited guests to an art symposium about the building of the former Syrian Orphanage last June. Some artists had previously gained unauthorised access to the building of the first Schneller school

which has stood empty and barricaded since 2009. They wanted to take prints of the ornaments on the walls, document the decay and alienate artistically some of the objects they found. They had climbed down into the former school detention cell where the recently founded Israeli Army had apparently detained some of their right and left wing opponents in 1948/49: fighters from the radical Lehi militia had left their graffiti as well as Israeli communists. The symposium and the art exhibition wanted to report all about this.



Photo: EMS/Gräbe

Uwe Gräbe (3rd f.r.) with organisers of the Jerusalem Artists’ House, representatives from the Office for the Protection of Historic Buildings and Monuments and members of the investor family Hillel in front of an imprint of the main inscription of the Syrian Orphanage.



The building of the former Syrian Orphanage founded by Johann Ludwig Schneller in 1860 has a chequered history behind it. After the German owners had been interned by the British Mandatory power during World War II, the British Army set up their offices there in 1940. Right after the departure of the British in 1948, the army of the newly founded state of Israel commandeered the building as a barracks. In September 1952, the Treaty of Luxembourg and the German-Israeli Compensation Agreement were signed. Part of the DM 3.45 billion which the German Federal Republic had to pay Israel for the mass murder of Jewish people was settled by the German state in the form of church properties which were located on Israeli territory and whose value was estimated at DM 3.85 million. The Federal government then paid this sum to the original owners of the properties. 63 per cent of the sum, i.e. DM 2.42 million, was promised at that time to the Evangelical Association for the Syrian Orphanage.<sup>1</sup> This was certainly much less than the properties were worth – but on the other hand it provided a good starting capital to finance the new beginning of Schneller work in the 1950s!

At the beginning of 2009, the Israeli military moved out of the former Syrian Orphanage; in 2010, we were able to recover the altar from the former chapel. Since 2012, the entire plot has been gradually converted by the City of Jerusalem into flats, kindergartens and cultural centres for ultra-Orthodox Jews from the surrounding neighbourhood. But they had not yet found an investor for the main building.

So it was in fact a coup when the Rabbi family Hillel announced at the symposium

in June that they had recently bought the building and they would shortly start renovations on the roof to prevent wind and weather from further damaging the valuable building structure. They intended to set up a "Museum of Israeli Communities" there. This would acknowledge all the groups which had previously arrived as immigrants and had influenced the land on which the State of Israel was situated today. The Hillels were thinking here about Jewish communities whose existence in the neighbouring Arab states had ended with the founding of the Israeli state. But they were also thinking of representatives of Schneller work from Germany who, as Rabbi Hillel said, had brought with them an enormous push towards modernisation in Palestine at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries.

The artistic audience, which consisted mainly of young, secular Israelis, could not conceal their irritation at this decision. One person asked why it was that "another of our religious persons" had to buy a property in Jerusalem which was both prominent and historical? Rabbi Hillel was able to baffle the audience. To the question of how he intended to protect the façade inscriptions, he replied that it was at least possible to read "Lord Jesus, dear Saviour, have mercy on us!" "Of course," said the Rabbi. "For this is also part of the history of this country."

*Uwe Gräbe*

# WE LOOK FORWARD TO NEW MEMBERS!

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) supports and accompanies the work of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon and the Theodor Schneller School in Jordan. Its special task is to offer poor children school education and vocational training at the Schneller Schools. The EVS supplies information about churches and Christians in the Middle East in its publications and at its events.

The EVS publishes the Schneller Magazine four times a year and sends it to readers free of charge. Subscription to the magazine does not automatically bestow membership to the EVS Association. **Dear Reader, we would be delighted to welcome you as member of the EVS** and receive your support not only for the Schneller schools but also the work of the editorial team.

If you want to become a member of the EVS, we will be glad to send you an application for membership. The annual minimum fee for individuals is Euro 25 and Euro 50 for companies and organisations. By making a donation to the Schneller schools, you are supporting the work of a recognised charitable welfare and social organisation.



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## FROM HAMBURG TO GENEVA

**Geneva (ECC).** The long-standing Middle East Liaison Officer of the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW), Owe Boersma, became Coordinator of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) at the World Council of Churches (ECC) in Geneva at the beginning of October. He takes over the post from Manuel Quintero who now goes into retirement. Through his work at the EMW, the governing body of the regional mission societies in Germany, Boersma is highly acquainted with the work of the Schneller schools and Middle East work of the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS). The EMS, which is an organisation that sends Ecumenical accompaniers, will also work closely with Boersma in future.

EAPPI is the concrete reply to an appeal sent by church leaders in Jerusalem made to the ECC in 2002. At that time, they wrote in a letter: "We respectfully request the protection of people in order to make a contribution to the restoration of mutual trust and offer safety to the dependants of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. Furthermore, we would like to appeal to all peace-loving people all over the world to come and join our demonstration for a just peace." Today more than 70 churches, ecumenical parishes and church ministries and societies in 22 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and Latin America take part in the programme. Since then, almost 1,500 accompaniers have been sent. The Ecumenical accompaniers live directly at their deployment location for three months and work in international teams, e.g. in Hebron, Jericho or Jerusalem. The EMS and the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools send God's

blessings to Owe Boersma on his new important post as EAPPI Coordinator.



Photo: Emma Boersma

In future, Owe Boersma will coordinate the EAPPI programme at the ECC in Geneva.

## KING DONATES LAND TO BUILD A CHURCH

**Manama (Fides).** The King of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, has donated a plot of land to the Coptic Orthodox community to build the second Coptic church in the kingdom. The new Christian church will be built in the capital Manama and will become the focal point for around 1,500 Coptic families living on the Gulf in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and mainly working as guest workers. Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa had already announced his donation to the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Tawadros II on a visit to Egypt at the end of April. It is not the first time that the King has demonstrated his generosity towards the Christian community in Bahrain. In 2013, he donated a plot of land measuring 9,000 square metres to the Catholic Church and work on building a cathedral started in early 2014.

# WITH ALL SENSES ...



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

### About Schneller Magazine 3/2016:

Thank you for making sure that this insightful magazine is translated into English so that we can learn about Christianity in the Middle East and the interesting news of the Schneller schools in Lebanon and Jordan.

*Aziz Shalabi, USA*

I have read the magazine for decades. Issue No. 3/2016 is a highly interesting edition which answered a lot of questions for me.

*Klaus Illmer-Kephalides,  
pastor ret., Bielefeld.*

My colleague sent me the latest issue of Schneller Magazine as a must-read. I'd also like to extend our great thanks for the inclusion of the two articles exploring the ecumenical movement in the Middle East in your latest issue — both of which brought awareness to the critical issue of shaping the future of Christianity in the region. We especially enjoyed the interview with our mutual friend, Dr. Sabra.

*Bethany Waggoner,  
incumbent communication officer  
of the Middle-East Church Council,  
MECC, Beirut*

Thank you very much for sending me the electronic version of the Schneller Magazine which I always read and take note of with great interest. I admire your competence and the substantial contents.

*Albrecht Hauser,  
church councillor ret., Korntal*

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

Please visit us on the Internet at [www.evs-online.org](http://www.evs-online.org)



Sing a new song to the Lord! Sing to the Lord, all the earth!  
(Psalm 96:1)



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