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The Bond of Peace

Palestine, Israel and the hope for reconciliation – despite everything

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Dear Reader,

“... in the bond of peace” is the motto of this year’s World Day of Prayer on 1 March, whose liturgy comes from Palestine. Even before 7 October, it was not easy to believe in peace and reconciliation in the Middle East. It has become even more difficult after Hamas brutally launched an attack on Israel and as the war in Gaza continues to kill increasing numbers of people. Since then, too many threads of life have been severed and this is continuing unabated. The toll of human suffering on both sides is so great, the traumas in both societies so overwhelming, that there seems to be no longer any realistic chance of peace and reconciliation.



But does the human question of peace and reconciliation revolve around the issue of realism alone? There are people in Palestine and Israel who continue to cling to the idea of reconciliation despite everything that has happened. Not because they are naive dreamers. On the contrary, they believe that human beings were created in such a way that they are not only capable of war but also of reconciliation. They believe in the reconciliatory potential of religions, the power of faith, the inherent humanity in people, while still remaining completely grounded in the facts. Because such an inner mindset still needs to prove itself in the complexity of everyday life.

This issue contains views such as these. Listening to them is especially comforting and encouraging in times of distress. This is exactly how the World Day of Prayer sees its role: as an invitation to join in the worldwide bond of peace and to pray together for the people and for peace in the Holy Land.

On a more encouraging note, there is news about what the Theodor Schneller School is planning, namely a complete refurbishment of the boarding home buildings. Doesn’t sound so exciting at first, you might think? Then read about the new paths that the school and the children are taking with this challenge.

On behalf of the entire editorial team, I would like to send you my warmest greeting and may we all never lose our hope for peace in the Middle East.

Best regards,

Katja Dorothea Buck

Engaging in a debate in love

Is it at all possible to engage in a debate about the concept of reconciliation with theological responsibility here in the Middle East in times such as these? For the people living here, the war and all its consequences are currently the focal point of everyday life. Many have suffered severe traumatic experiences – on both sides. Existential fears are omnipresent. Any thoughts about reconciliation are simply ruled out. Initiatives that have been involved in encounter work for many years try to maintain contacts with the “other side”. It is certainly a challenge for those who persist in this endeavour. Meanwhile, the suffering and dying continues.

There is no place for any naive hope of reconciliation here. The events in this region over the last few decades have been too long, too complex and too complicated. As people from Germany, we also have our own history with the Israel-Palestine conflict. We are not neutral observers but we must be fully conscious of the position we adopt when we put forward our arguments. And we need to be fully aware of whether this stance can at all contribute to reconciliation and how. This is what people on both sides expect from us.

Reconciliation means that people embark on a path together where they can speak out about the injustice they have experienced and recognise and accept it as such. This is not possible as long as people are held hostage, as long as the war continues, as long as people die a violent death every day and as long as there are no

encounters as equals. As long as the fronts continue to harden, there is no room for new forms of coexistence. We must be absolutely conscious of this.

This situation raises two questions. The urgent question of who can advocate for an end to all violence and what form should this take? Through the life of Jesus, our own religion gives us the urgent

*Let all
that you do
be done in
love.*

1 Corinthians 16:14
(2024 annual watchword)

task of searching for, arguing and finding a way of dealing with one another in a way that serves life and does not destroy it.

The second question is directed at our own attitude on these arduous and difficult paths – in the different contexts in which we live and from which we care about the future of Israel and Palestine. Is it possible for us to actually engage with people who hold a different attitude, experience and opinion in the spirit of the annual motto for 2024 and allow the process of confrontation to happen “in love”?



When love weighs more than everything else – graffiti on a wall near Bethlehem

Not a love that covers up differences, but a love that truly recognises the needs of others and therefore opens up new ways of working together.

Knowing how difficult these paths are and hoping they will nevertheless become possible at some time, I send you my warmest greetings from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

Ines Fischer has been a pastor at the Church of the Ascension (Himmelfahrt-kirche) on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem since September 2023. As the second pastor in Jerusalem, she is in charge of providing ministry to tourists and pilgrims.

As congregational pastor, she is also responsible for organising evenings for the congregation and working with families.

Unfounded accusations

How the 2024 World Day of Prayer in Germany was left in the lurch

It was clear from the outset that the 2024 World Day of Prayer from Palestine would not have an easy time in Germany. But nobody could have imagined that the 7th October would turn everything upside down. Under pressure from various quarters, the liturgy from Palestine was changed to suit the German context. The Palestinian World Day of Prayer team chose to distance itself from this version. The dispute shows that German churches have a problem accepting the positions of their ecumenical brothers and sisters.

It was seven years ago that the International World Day of Prayer Committee decided that the liturgy for the 2024 World Day of Prayer should be written by women in Palestine. Three years ago, Palestinian Christian women from various churches came together to develop this liturgy. They only managed to accomplish this online, not only because of the coronavirus crisis, but also because some of them live in East Jerusalem and others on the West Bank. It's not that easy to travel back and forth. The Barrier separates them.

In 2022, their liturgy was available in English and was ready for translation into the various country languages. The World Day of Prayer is celebrated in more than 150 countries, always on the first Friday in March. According to the German World Day of Prayer Committee, 800,000 women take part in Germany.

Before the actual service takes place, they inform themselves about the situation in each country. They want to know how women in particular are doing there. Some World Day of Prayer groups even learn how to cook typical local dishes, dance dances and sing songs. The motto here is "Pray informed". The World Day of Prayer has been a well-established grass roots movement within the global ecumenical movement for almost a hundred years.

Everyone involved realised from the outset that it would not be easy to organise a service from Palestine in Germany. When the official German translation was available at the beginning of 2023, it was scrutinised by anti-Semitism officers in the regional churches, representatives of the Jewish-Christian dialogue and other experts on the Middle East. None of them vetoed it. This is because – and it must be clearly stated at this point – the Palestinian women had written a liturgy for the global World Day of Prayer movement addressing the difficult situation of the people in Palestine but without using typical anti-Semitic statements. Why should they? After all, a World Day of Prayer is about bringing together before God the challenges, fears and hopes of the people in the country in question.

But then came 7 October, when Hamas carried out the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. Suddenly this put a different light on everything – not just the World Day of Prayer.



Even if there are many different points of view on Palestine, one thing is indisputable: Jesus was born in Bethlehem which is part of Palestine today. What is known as the Grotto of the Nativity is there to remind us of this.

Perhaps it can be interpreted as an expression of our own helplessness in the face of the madness that was unleashed in the Middle East that suddenly everything that was said and written about Israel and Palestine in Germany was scrutinised for any shadow of anti-Semitic or anti-Israeli bias. After all, something has to be done. And just the suspicion that someone might actually mean harm to Israel and the Jews was more prevalent than ever. Statements were interpreted in many different ways. This was also the case with the liturgy of the World Day of Prayer.

At the end of October, the German Coordination Council for the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation (DKR) accused the World Day of Prayer of “irresponsibly

catering to anti-Semitic, anti-Israel stereotypes”. Among other things, they criticised the fact that the Palestinian women had not explicitly emphasised that Jesus was Jewish and that the Psalm 85 proposed for the service was not explicitly introduced as a prayer from the Jewish tradition. Did they really assume that the women in Jerusalem had not realised this themselves? Perhaps that’s why they didn’t think it was worth mentioning! How many churches in Germany do not mention this every time, simply because it is taken for granted!

Bochum theologian Günther Thomas topped it all and even accused the World Day of Prayer of “eliminator anti-Semitism” and “demonising Israel”. In an open letter to the two major churches, he de-

And Jesus was crucified, buried and resurrected in Jerusalem. That is where his cross is said to have stood in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

manded that they distance themselves from the World Day of Prayer immediately. The accusations were as harsh as they were unfounded.

But no one in the churches verified the accusations against the liturgy. The pressure was passed on directly to the German World Day of Prayer Committee. In order to remove the World Day of Prayer from the line of fire, the committee in Germany agreed to withdraw the liturgy, which had already been printed and many thousands of copies sent out, and to present a revised version by the beginning of 2024. This version contains an updated content with regard to 7 October and Israel's subsequent war against Hamas. The Israeli victims are also mentioned and the deep roots of the Christian faith in Judaism shines through more strongly.

When the new liturgy was published, many people pounced on it again, put the two versions side by side and compared them. Approval came from the ranks of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. But for those who have long been involved in advocacy work for Palestine, it was a disaster. Passages criticising Israel as an occupying power had been toned down to a more neutral wording. Of course, this sounds much gentler to German ears. But the Palestinian Christians had actually addressed things more directly. And isn't the idea of the World Day of Prayer precisely to make the voices of the women of a particular region heard as authentically as possible?



In Jerusalem, they felt annoyed. In an open letter to the German World Day of Prayer Committee in mid-January, they criticised the fact that there had now been “changes, insertions, deletions and additions that distorted the meaning” and they had not been clearly marked. “It is our concern to point out that these edits were not authorised, approved or released by us,” the letter states.

The women of the German World Day of Prayer were well aware that they had entered delicate territory with the changes and additions. In a letter to the women in Palestine at the end of January, they wrote that they realised the changes from the Palestinian perspective “are an expression of a lack of respect for your experiences and threaten to undermine the fundamental principles” of the WDP. We apologise on both counts and it was certainly not our intention!” However, the additions are due to “an even more polarised discussion in Germany since 7 October 2023 and are intended as supplementary information for our specific context – neither as an affront



Katja Buck

especially in Germany – have celebrated the World Day of Prayer liturgy from Palestine and prayed for peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land. During the preparations, a woman from a congregation near Herrenberg put it so aptly: “The good Lord will certainly know how to understand it all.”

However, what must not be forgotten and what urgently needs to be addressed is the question of how this whole mess actually happened. It came about from the massive but unsubstantiated accusations made by the German Coordination Council for the Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation and by theologians such as Günther Thomas in Bochum, who accused the World Day of Prayer of anti-Semitism where none existed. They and all those who accepted these accusations without verifying them bear the real responsibility for this ecumenical disaster.

It is a German problem that everything that comes from Palestine or has to do with Palestine is met with the suspicion that someone actually wants to harm “the Jews”. In some cases, this suspicion may well be justified. However, blanket condemnations and overhasty insinuations are not suitable tools in the fight against anti-Semitism, nor in the commitment to a secure future for the state of Israel. On the contrary, they can poison ecumenical relationships which are needed more urgently than ever in a world that is increasingly coming apart at the seams.

Katja Dorothea Buck

Note: This article is based on the state of affairs at the end of January 2024 and does not address any subsequent developments to do with the World Day of Prayer.

or distortion of the first version nor as questioning the reality of Palestinian life”.

However, they refused to accept the criticism that the new liturgy had not been authorised by the women of the Palestinian World Day of Prayer. They pointed out that it was neither usual nor possible for a national committee to authorise all translations into one of the hundred or so languages. Contextualisation in translations is quite common and permitted within the guidelines of the international World Day of Prayer movement.

However, it appears that the interpretations of precisely these guidelines differ between Germany and Palestine. There will still be a need for further clarifying discussions at international level. Nor can it be denied that trust between the Palestinian and German women had suffered. We can only hope that both sides can find common ground again. Perhaps this will only be possible once the World Day of Prayer has taken place on 1 March and as many people as possible around the world – and

Up to the limit

Comparison between the 1994 and 2024 World Days of Prayer

Yes, I still have a copy of the World Day of Prayer liturgy from 1994: “Go-See-Act. Women’s World Day of Prayer - Palestine”. Even back then, the debates were emotional – up to the limit and beyond. Nobody wants to experience something like that again – least of all the writers. Presumably, some of the statements in the 2024 liturgy can also be interpreted as delayed reactions to the dispute of the time.

The biblical verses for this year’s World Day of Prayer were taken from Ephesians 4:1-7 and given to the Palestinian writer as the theme for the liturgy. “Bear with one another in love”... A “bond of peace”... How such verses are interpreted in the Israeli-Palestinian context in many church circles in Germany was made clear by the German World Day of Prayer Committee in its adaptation of the liturgy at the beginning of 2024 (which was subsequently criticised by the Palestinian committee as not having been agreed on or approved): “We are thinking of the current situation in Palestine and Israel. Can there be a just and lasting peace? Could these Bible verses make a contribution to peace in the Middle East?”, it says.

However, the Palestinian writers initially seemed to associate them with something completely different: “Bear with one another in love...”, “let us overcome differences in views and theological interpretations...” and “confess that we find it difficult to accept others without prejudice...” – Can this be heard as anything other than an almost desperate plea to all those who are invited to join in

prayer around the world? As if they meant, please accept what we want to say here in our prayer. Don’t immediately submit our words to a barrage of suspicion. Don’t criticise us again with your clever theological arguments. Don’t attack us again with arguments as you did in 1994...

Some want peace, others want to be heard first.

To put it in a nutshell, you could say the Germans want peace between Israelis and Palestinians. The Palestinians, on the other hand, want to be heard first. If this was the intention, then the writers have probably failed completely with this appeal since the dispute is even more convoluted today than it was thirty years ago.

And yet there is a significant difference between the liturgy of that time and the one today. In 1994, the World Day of Prayer liturgy was largely a liturgy of Passion that followed Jesus’ path to the cross. This path was portrayed as the juxtaposi-

Vince Musil/ The White House



tion of today's Palestinian women as images of Jesus' disciples on the one hand and Israeli soldiers on the other. Critics felt this reminded them (whether justified or not) of traditional, anti-Jewish Passion liturgies, in which Jews took on the role of Jesus' adversaries and ultimately as Christ's murderers. Possible identifications of this kind were strictly avoided in the liturgy of 2024. However, this proved of very little use to the Palestinian writers.

Then, as now, the political situation changed dramatically between the time when the liturgy was written and the day the World Day of Prayer should take place. The texts for 1994 were still being formulated during the final months of the First Intifada. But then came the Oslo I Accord between Israel and Palestine on 13 September 1993 (the famous handshake on the White House lawn), and by the time the World Day of Prayer took place, the Gaza-Jericho Agreement on Palestinian autonomy was virtually ready for signature.

While the world greeted this event with great excitement, the Palestinian women

were rather sceptical and did not want to change anything in their liturgy which was based on the theme of lamentation. At this year's World Day of Prayer, the 7th October 2023, with all its devastating consequences, came between the drafting of the liturgy and the worship service – and once again, the question was raised whether the text should be changed.

This time there will definitely be no alternative!

At that time, several German parties put forward alternative liturgies. The most notable of these was the complete redrafting of the liturgy of the Denkendorfer Kreis (Denkendorf Circle) under the programmatic title "Turn our lamentation into joy". Not quite as drastic, for example, were the changes in the text of the North Elbian Christian and Jewish Working Group. Whether such reformulations and changes were legitimate was the subject of heated debate in 1994. Thirty years later, they should have been avoided. Consequently, the German World Day of Prayer Committee is attempting to present its editorial changes from January 2024 merely as a kind of

In 1994, there was a real hope for lasting peace (photo left)



Hosny Salah/ pixabay

2024. With the massacre of 7 October, Hamas intended to make any peace impossible in the long term. The people of Palestine and Israel are now paying the price.



Mohammed Ibrahim/ unsplash

Most of the rockets from the Gaza Strip were shot down by the „Iron Dome“ Israeli air defence system – here in October 2022. The Hamas ground attack a year later apparently took the security forces by surprise.

transposition into a different context, as expressly permitted in the international World Day of Prayer guidelines.

It would have been much more preferable if these editorial changes had not come from the German World Day of Prayer Committee. Instead, the Palestinian women themselves could have brought themselves to explicitly insert a prayer for the Israeli victims of 7 October – especially for the women who fell victim to mass rape by Hamas terrorists. Not “but the occupation...” or “but the now twenty-fold number of Palestinian war victims...” – but simply a small sign of solidarity from women in the face of sexualised violence used as a terrible weapon of war.

No anti-Semitism.

Surely, the texts of the three speakers in the current liturgy are not anti-Semitic. The word “anti-Semitism” should not always be used as a term of war. But with-



1994 – 2024: The service resources for the two World Days of Prayer look totally different. But there was already a dispute in 1994 when peace seemed within reach. After 7 October, the chance seems even more remote than ever before.



In 2023, thousands of pilgrims from all over the world travelled to Jerusalem for the Palm Sunday procession. They will not be coming this year. (Pilgrimage) tourism has almost completely collapsed since 7 October.

out exception, these texts do not show any positive approach to the Israeli side. Even after 7 October, the Palestinian writers are unable to express empathy – almost a mirror image of many Israelis who also often express an appalling lack of empathy for the Palestinian victims of the terrible war in Gaza. Presumably this is simply the way it is when you are directly affected. And it is now all the more important for us outsiders to practise empathy with all of the victims – instead of making snap judgements and condemnations.

Thirty years after the positive developments in the spring of 1994, such a conclusion represents a complete and utter failure. It is all the more obvious that thirty years of peace and dialogue work have not even begun to alleviate the deep-seated traumas on either sides. They are more

out of touch with each other than ever before. Even the World Day of Prayer liturgy is a symptom of this failure. Joining this prayer while at the same time having close Jewish-Israeli friends on your mind who are themselves struggling desperately to cope with the current political developments in their own country, will make you stammer, to say the least.

In this respect, joining in with this liturgy probably also means entering into a state of inner discord that is almost unbearable. I will probably pray it at some point on 1 March, as I did in 1994, even if it is not easy for me in some countries. After all, the Palestinian authors are also my sisters

Uwe Gräbe

“Everyone has the right to live their life in dignity”

How a kindergarten contributes to reconciliation

The Saint Charles Kindergarten in West Jerusalem brings together Arab children from Christian and Muslim families from the West Bank and East Jerusalem and lies in a district that is predominantly Jewish. Mother Superior Daniela Gabor is not giving up hope for peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land even after 7 October. “As a nun, I deeply believe that people have goodness in them,” she says.

The German Hospice St Charles Jerusalem, which is the official name of the entire institution including the kindergarten and guest house, has had to overcome many challenges over the past hundred years. The institution has lived through all the wars and intifadas. Is what happened on 7 October just another example in a long series of violence and war? Or did the massacre and the subsequent war in Gaza fundamentally change anything?

Neither the people of Israel nor I myself have ever experienced a massacre as terrible as the one unleashed by Hamas on 7 October. There was widespread panic, fear and despair. Many people were traumatised by these terrible events and are still suffering from what they went through. After war was officially declared, many had to leave their homes and are still seeking refuge.



Mother Superior Daniela colours Easter eggs with kindergarten

How has the work in the kindergarten changed since then?

At first, we were all paralysed by the shock. We had to keep the children at home but after a few days, we were able to give them lessons online. Two weeks later, the Ministry of Education allowed the kindergartens and schools to reopen under certain conditions. We sisters took care of the necessary safety regulations. We wanted to express our need to continue looking after the little ones under our care.



children.

Has there been any change in your relationships with your Jewish neighbours?

We still have good neighbourly relations with one another. We are open to dialogue and try to give one another support when help is needed.

The children in your care come from Palestinian families. They see what is currently happening to children in Gaza on television and social media. How do you deal with this as head of the kindergarten?

Of course I am aware of how much the children are exposed to the terrible news every day. Together with our teachers, we try to create an atmosphere of security and loving attention for them. We keep them distracted by playing games and singing songs together, and we also talk to them one-to-one and shed some light on the darkness in their everyday lives.

How do the kindergarten teachers deal with this? Some of them come from the West Bank themselves.

The situation is just as deeply depressing for them as it is for everyone else. Each of them is trying to come to terms with the terrible events in their own way, and in some cases, it also affects their own families directly, without openly showing the problems they are going through.

Do you also discuss all of this with the children's parents?

This is an extremely sensitive topic. Everyone is created by God and is loved by him. Everyone has the right to live a life in dignity. We concentrate on our educational tasks and try to fulfil this right.

From the very beginning, St Charles Kindergarten was a project of reconciliation between all those living in the Holy Land. Given the present situation in Israel and Palestine, is it even possible to think about reconciliation?

Despite the current almost hopeless situation, we are holding on to the hope of a peaceful future for the people of this region, but we are aware of the many difficulties that stand in the way of lasting reconciliation.

Can you personally still imagine that one day there will be peace between Israelis and Arabs, that these two peoples will be able to live together, side by side in reconciliation?

As a nun, I deeply believe in the goodness of people and am convinced that, with the right amount of goodwill on both sides, what seems impossible will one day become possible with God's help.

Where do you currently see your contribution as a Catholic sisterhood with German roots in Jerusalem?

In the long tradition of our presence in the Holy Land, it has always been part of our philosophy to keep our doors open to all those in need, regardless of their religion, nation or social background, and to provide them with assistance as much as we can.

Katja Dorothea Buck conducted the interview.

Convent of sisters, guest house for pilgrims and kindergarten

The Order of the Sisters of St Charles Borromeo has been present in Jerusalem for more than a hundred years. True to their calling, the sisters

Mother Superior Maria Daniela Gabor SMCB has headed the convent, which currently has seven sisters, since 2008. She is a trained educator and is also the director of the kindergarten that was started in 1989. Today, the kindergarten schools about 140 children, mainly girls ranging from 3 to 6 years old, preparing them for entry to primary school. Many of the teachers and helpers live in the West Bank and come to West Jerusalem to work at the St Charles kindergarten every day.

The children are taught German, English and their native tongue, the Palestinian dialect of Arabic. This is an important prerequisite to quality for entry to the Schmidt's Girls College in East Jerusalem with which the kindergarten cooperates closely. Worldwide, Schmidt's College in one of the 140 German schools on foreign soil. It was founded in 1886 as a private girls' school under Catholic sponsorship. Today, it is run by the German Association of the Holy Land.



The German Hospice, St Charles Jerusalem lies in the Israeli part of Jerusalem.

look after pilgrims coming to the Holy Land as well as local people. This is why the German Hospice, St Charles Jerusalem also has a kindergarten as well as a guest house.

“You can’t achieve anything reasonable with rage in your belly.”

Bridge builders and devout people on both sides

Igal Avidan is Israeli and has lived in Berlin for many years. In his book “... und es wurde Licht!” (see book review in the German version of SM 4-2023, p. 30), he introduces Jewish and Arab Israelis who are committed to totally different ways of peaceful coexistence. In January 2024, he was back in Israel and met some of them.

You wrote your book before the Hamas massacre on 7 October. Aren't all those who have been campaigning for understanding now wondering whether it was all for nothing?

People like those I write about in my book are still very important. I met Fadi again in January, for example. He is an Arab Israeli nurse in his early 30s and lives

in Acre. During the street battles in May 2021 when Arab and Jewish groups clashed, he stopped an escalation on the first night of the demonstration by Arab residents. He was able to do this because he was well known in his city and had grown up with Arab and Jewish neighbours. On

the second night, he was alerted by local politician Sheikh Abbas Zakour and was able to save the life of a Jewish man of the same age who had been seriously injured by an Arab mob. I wanted to meet Zak-

our in January. We went to his home and he pointed out to me that he has a Christian neighbour on one side and a Jewish neighbour on the other. It was important for him to show me that.

You live in Berlin and have family and friends in Israel. How do you yourself deal with the fact that the chances of a lasting peace in the region are receding ever further into the distance?

It's very difficult. After all, a good friend of mine who lives on the Gaza border only survived by a miracle. I wrote to the people in my book a few days after Hamas attacked Israel. Some didn't even bother to answer at all, others only sent me a short reply. When I was back there in January, some did talk to me, some only wanted to talk if I didn't quote them afterwards. And a Jewish man told me that it is not patriotic to do anything with Arab Israelis at the moment. A wrong post can even damage your career, especially for Arab Israelis. There are enough cases where some have been harshly criticised on social media because of this or even arrested.

What do your relatives and friends in Israel say?

It's extremely frustrating. They say that Hamas must be wiped out, that Gaza should be flattened, that all Palestinians from Gaza should be sent to Saudi Arabia or Egypt. These are crude phrases that lead nowhere. You can't achieve anything reasonable with rage in your belly. →



Igal Avidan

Later, I went to a demonstration with friends against Netanyahu and in favour of freeing the hostages. Nevertheless, you realise that the war is very present. People have lost friends or relatives. Or they are worried about the hostages. You quickly meet people who have been evacuated and now have to live in a hotel in Tel Aviv, for example. Pictures of the murdered victims and hostages are posted everywhere in the streets. You see them as soon as you get off the plane. The gangways are full of these pictures. The Palestinians don't appear in the Israeli media; it's always about our suffering and that the whole world is against us. Or that Hamas is synonymous with all Palestinians.

However, you also consciously seek contact with the Arab side. What do you notice there?

During my current research, I was also in Jerusalem and wanted to record something for the radio in the Old City. For this, I needed someone to accompany me who knew where I could go and where I shouldn't. My friend Mahmud, who spent many years in an Israeli prison, sent me his cousin. He in turn arranged for another relative at short notice. But he told me while we were walking that he wouldn't go to West Jerusalem. We preferred not to speak in Hebrew. Then, when I went on by taxi to Givat Shaul, I was shocked when I realised that Palestinian taxi drivers in the Old City still refer to Deir Yassin as Givat Shaul, as if they were still in 1948. He took me to an ultra-Orthodox woman there. This is also part of the colourful mosaic of Israeli society.

Uwe Gräbe



Extreme opinions are particularly popular during crises and war situations. What do you think needs to happen so that those who have chosen to build bridges are given a greater chance to be heard again?

The government and the media make hardly no difference between the Palestinians in Gaza and Hamas. But what should happen to the 2.3 million people in Gaza? What should happen after the war? Gaza cannot continue to exist as an enclave. This time bomb exploded on 7 October and will explode a second time if nothing changes. How much more money should be ploughed into walls and fences? No buffer zone will ever solve the conflict, no matter how big it is. The pol-



Acre is one of the mixed cities in Israel where Arab and Jewish Israelis live in close proximity. One symbol of this is the old Khan al-Umdan caravanserai, whose tower features two crescent moons reminiscent of its Ottoman past. The dial of the Jewish clock and the Israeli flag both point to the present.

from the Middle East does not spill over here. I was at a conference at the German Islam Academy in Berlin shortly after 7 October. I received a very friendly welcome. That's how to make contacts with people whose family comes from Palestine and who work just 500 metres away from me. You get to know one another. I also invited a local imam to a reading of my book in Neukölln. He came, sat in the front row and promised to invite me to his mosque. We have to start building bridges here.

There is a theory that the conflict is essentially a religious conflict, in other words a battle between Judaism and Islam. Would you agree with that?

No, it always depends on how you look at it. For example, take Sheikh Zakour from Acre. He is a devout Muslim and is committed to ensuring that the call to prayer from the mosques in his city is not felt as a nuisance. They have decided in Acre that the imam with the most beautiful voice should call to prayer in all nine mosques. They also make sure that the call is not too loud. Or take the two directors of the Jewish-Arab theatre in Acre, a Jewish Israeli and an Arab Israeli. Both of them are devout. When they travel together, they share a room. And each prays according to their religion. If you want to, it can work.

icies of recent years have meant that the younger generation in Israel in particular knows nothing about the Palestinians. People don't know each other, so it can easily happen that they no longer see the other person as a human being. This also applies to the other side. The way Hamas has taken its violence out on people and then presented it in the social media as a deterrent shows that dehumanisation has long since taken place.

When you look at Germany, what role should our politics and society play in this conflict?

Raising awareness is very important, especially in Germany, so that violence

Katja Dorothea Buck conducted the interview.

“People want to live peacefully, prosperously and with dignity.”

Interview with a visionary

Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi is one of the moderate Palestinian voices. He has not given up his belief in peace and reconciliation. The vast majority of people want nothing more than to live peacefully, prosperously and with dignity, he says. Dajani also has a clear vision of the how to realize a two-state solution.

October 7th is a turning point. The people of Israel and Palestine have endured endless suffering. Anyone who, like you, has been campaigning for peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians for decades must be disappointed. Have all your efforts come to nothing?

I can only speak for myself. I am disappointed with the ferocity of this terrible war, which extremists started, and innocent moderate civilians are paying the price. I feel empathy with the victims on both sides. I hope Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners are set free to join their families and friends. As for my work, it's like football: snow and heavy rain do not cancel the game. The human casualties and physical destruction caused by war are strengthening my will and determination to continue my efforts to pursue peace, save lives, and honor those who lost their lives. They should not have died in vain.

Where do you find the strength and endurance to continue in such a situation?



The Quran tells us we may dislike something that will be good for us. Thus, looking forward, I believe this tragic war will advance the cause of peace and reconciliation. Its sad memory would empower the moderates not to remain silent on both sides. I think the people on both sides would rise and choose a more enlightened leadership that calls for peace, coexistence, and reconciliation. That is why I remain optimistic.

I do not personally have to deal with the assumption that the chances of lasting peace between the two peoples of Israel and Palestine have receded since I do not believe in short-term assumptions based on the emotional grief generated by the ongoing violent confrontations between Israel and Hamas. Extremists want us to



At my first meeting with Mohammed Dajani (centre) in Jerusalem in March 2023, Sharon Buenos (right) from Zikaron Basalon also happened to be there. Both had recently received the Simon Wiesenthal Prize in Vienna for the initiatives they had founded to commemorate the Shoah and combat anti-Semitism.

living among them and know they want to live peacefully and prosperously, with their dignity and respect in an independent democratic state that reflects their national identity.

What role can and should foreign countries play?

Foreign countries, including Germany, should work on promoting peace and reconciliation between the two conflicting sides. They should call for an immediate cease-fire to save the lives of civilians. Is-

think that the chasm between both people is so vast it will never be reminded, and thus, peace will remain elusive until one side defeats the other and has Israel or Palestine free from the River (Jordan) to the (Mediterranean) Sea. This is an illusion, a mirage. There are millions of people on each side, each having their foreign allies who do not believe this should happen.

Extreme opinions do indeed boom in crisis and war situations. You advocate that moderate voices are heard. Who listens to you?

Once the war is over and people realize the devastation the war caused, then they will turn against violence, provided they are not silenced by the same forces that initiated the war. Then, moderate voices will be heard. I am being heard. The people listen to me. I express their wishes. I am

“I never asked anyone I met what is his religion.”

rael’s continued bombardment of Palestinian homes and neighborhoods in revenge for what happened on October 7th is making Israel lose its historic support among people globally.

There are different interpretations of the conflict. Some say that it is a religious conflict, i.e., the battle between Judaism and Islam. Others say the conflict is purely political. Israelis and Palestinians are fighting over the same land. How do you see this?

Religious extremists want us to believe this is a purely religious conflict to gain support among their crowd. This is not a religious conflict, i.e., a battle between

Judaism and Islam. I am a Muslim and do not hate Jews. I have continuously expressed my empathy for them regarding the waves of anti-Semitism they faced and for the crime of the Holocaust perpetrated against them. I am committed to combatting anti-Semitism and promoting Holocaust education among Palestinians. I have many friends who are Jewish. I never asked anyone I met or was friends with what is his religion. I believe in what Gandhi said, 'Religions are different roads emerging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal.' I agree with him that all great religions are fundamentally equal. The conflict also is not purely political. Israelis and Palestinians are fighting over the same land, and the Israeli religious extremists use their faith to justify their actions.

What would be the next steps towards a solution?

The first primary step is to have new leadership on both sides and try to have moderate peace-loving leaders take power. Elections should be conducted to achieve this, but anti-Oslo Accords extremists should not be allowed to participate. The

“There is a better way to solve conflicts than killing each other.”

second step is for the rest of the world to acknowledge the State of Palestine, encompassing the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The third step is to work to bridge the gap between both

The Wasatia initiative – so that Islam becomes part of the solution

“Wasatia” was founded by Professor Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi in Palestine in 2007. Wasatia is the first and so far, the only Islamic movement that calls for a negotiated solution with Israel. With the concept of moderation, which can be derived from the Quran, the movement aims to help resolve the acute economic, social and political crises in Palestinian society and overcome the current climate of religious extremism and political violence.

Wasatia is an Arabic term denoting ‘centrism,’ ‘balance,’ ‘moderation,’ and ‘justice.’ In the Holy Quran, this appears in the second Surat, Verse 143. Thus, this verse comes

exactly in the middle of the Surat that is composed of 286 verses. There it says, {“We have created you as a mid-ground nation.”} {“Thus, have We made of you an Ummatan Wasatan (justly balanced).”} One of the famous quotes of Prophet Mohammed is: “The best way to run affairs is through moderation.” This concept resonates with other religions and philosophies.

Among the ranks of the Wasatia movement are religious leaders, educators, intellectuals, former prisoners in Israeli jails, women, businessmen, lawyers, and youth. They promote a founding platform that blends verses from the Holy Quran which extol the virtues of diversity,

people and build trust among them. The fourth step is to adopt a deradicalization process on all levels within both communities. The fifth step is to adopt a Wasatia education, i.e., the concept of moderation and centrism, in the Palestinian and Israeli curricula

When asked whether they condemn the violent events of October 7th in which Hamas and its allies killed 1200 Israelis, many Palestinians and pro-Palestinians refuse to do so. Why is that?

Many Palestinians and pro-Palestinians feel they are being asked to condemn what happened on October 7th without mentioning October 6th living under a repressive occupation and what happened October 8th and beyond in which Israeli bombardments killed more than 25,000 Palestinian civilians, mostly women, and

children, and totally destroyed Gaza.* Many would say, 'We condemn what happened on October 7th, but we also condemn the occupation and bombing of Gaza civilians.'

What is your position on this issue?

I do not have the word 'condemn' in my dictionary. It is a judgmental term. I oppose war, violence, and fighting. I advocate non-violence and believe there is a better way to solve conflicts than killing each other and destroying each other's homes, cities, and everyday way of life.

*Katja Dorothea Buck
conducted the interview.*

* Figures correct at mid-January 2024 (ed. note)

peace, middle ground, coexistence, democracy, and tolerance.

They call for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and in Gaza, with Jerusalem as an open city and shared capital. It advocates establishing a tolerant, democratic society at home by fostering a culture of moderation and attracting moderate Palestinian religious beliefs, pride in their Muslim heritage, and respect for the religious identity of other religions like Judaism and Christianity.

Wasatia argues that liberal democratic values of equity, tolerance, pluralism, freedom of speech and expression, the rule of law, and respect for civil and human rights have comparable Islamic values and cites surahs from the Holy

Quran to demonstrate this. In this way, religion will become part of the solution.

Wasatia is the brainchild of political science Professor Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, ex-director of the Regional Studies Institute and founding director of the American Studies at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. Dajani firmly believes that in the next few years, by the time the next general elections will take place, the new movement will be able to run and attract enough votes to become the largest bloc in the political life of the Palestinian people. "Already, many Islamic scholars in the Arab World and other Islamic countries are advocating the role of Wasatia – political and personal moderation – in Islamic life," says Dajani.

On the path with hope

Forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption in the three religions

The war in Gaza between Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, and the Israeli military has led to a profound humanitarian crisis. The consequences are not yet foreseeable. Nevertheless, at this point, the focus should be on the hope for reconciliation and forgiveness which is anchored in the liturgical calendars of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

For us in the northern hemisphere, Jerusalem is like the magnetic pole that attracts us in our search for the meaning of life and support from the Most High, the Almighty and the Good. We might also be searching for peace. But “peace” in the Semitic languages is less of a spiritual virtue and rather more the very down-to-earth outcome of negotiations, which is emphasised by a contract or a monetary payment. All of this is contained in the biblical concept of “shalom”.

In 2024, the Muslim Ramadan (1445) in spring and the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) in autumn stand almost parallel to each other. In between, the Orthodox Church begins the new liturgical year on 1 September according to the Gregorian calendar (or 14 September according to the Julian calendar). While the Jews enter the year 5784 since the creation of the world, according to the Byzantine count (which is based on the Julian calendar) this is the year 7532. It is impressive how closely Jews, Christians and Muslims remain linked by the Sumerian calendar which is the root of each of their calendars.

In Jerusalem, the divine creation of the world is often understood as much too static; everything is supposed to be “eternal”. So, many Jews believe that the history of salvation is condensed in a specific place in the Jewish temple. Syrian Orthodox Christians maintain that Jesus fulfilled the divine promises at the site of St Mark’s Monastery dating back to the 4th century, and others understand the Holy Sepulchre as the only central place of salvation where they pray day and night.

And yet, the tomb is empty. The resurrection of Jesus cannot be fixed in terms of space, even if some resourceful souvenir dealers may sell cans of Jerusalem air. In the Orthodox tradition, we are constantly on the path to commemorate the Virgin Mary and the saints. Or we simply hop on the express train to Haifa to follow the trail of the prophet Elijah. In a nutshell, the believer is always on the move.

New Year, Rosh Hashanah, always means a new beginning. The term “Shanah” can also be translated as “change”. Ten days after the New Year comes the Day of Atonement, “Yom Kippur”. The term comes from the Akkadian root “kipuru = ransom”. It initially deals with the difficult question of reconciliation between people. God then decides to inscribe the names in the “Book of Life”... or not. A profound joy arises from the experience: forgiveness is redeeming. It brings back life within the community.

Redemption always concerns the entire universe. The Yom Kippur prayer expresses this return to God: “Lord, forgive,



Holy City for Jews, Christians and Muslims: they all come together in Jerusalem.

pardon, expunge the sins of the entire community of the House of Israel, as well as those of the stranger who dwells with him, because the whole people (i.e. the entire human community) has gone astray." The Byzantine liturgy takes up these Jewish litanies of repentance. And very similar words are spoken during the Muslim fast of Ramadan. All these prayers have their roots in the same land.

This universality is the soul of Jerusalem. It is especially noticeable during the days of autumn. The Jewish prayer expresses it with depth and beauty: "God of our fathers, arise and reveal yourself in your glory before all creation." Thus, every being filled with the breath of life will say, "The Lord God of Israel lives and his kingdom has no limits."

But is it really possible to obtain any forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation

in the Lord Jesus Christ with such words of prayer? History teaches us that there have only been very few peaceful periods in the last ten thousand years. And yet, time and time again, people manage to overcome each other to forgive and reconcile. A much-quoted saying in the current conflicts is, "Neither forgive nor forget". But in Christ, this saying makes no sense. The ability to forgive is like a mark of Cain that everyone bears and which always reminds people that they are able to pass on God's goodness to others.

Father Alexander Winogradsky-Frenkel is an Archpriest in the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, where he is responsible for the Orthodox Christians of the Hebrew language in Israel. He is also a linguist specialising in psycholinguistics and Yiddish, a speech therapist, a Talmud scholar and a religious scientist.

The young architects

TSS involves the children in planning the refurbishment

The Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman is taking a completely new approach to the complete refurbishment of the boarding home buildings in Jordan. The project centres on the question of how rooms should be designed so that children feel comfortable and safe in them. As a result, the children and young adults were involved in the planning process. This also impressed the external architects and engineers.

It has been known for many years that the buildings at the TSS are in dire need of a complete refurbishment. Built in the 1950s and 1960s, the pipes, service systems and interior fittings are now getting on in years. But anyone who has ever renovated an old house from the ground up knows how much work it is, how much money it costs and how much planning has to be done in advance to ensure that the investment really pays off in the end.

Some time ago, the TSS commissioned the Royal Scientific Society (RSS) in Amman to carry out a complete survey of all the buildings on the school site – from the boarding home and workshops to the day school, guest house and church – in order to determine what refurbishment work was required. This major survey was financed by the American Friends of the Diocese of Jerusalem, which is the American circle of friends of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem, which is responsible for the TSS.

It should have come as no surprise to anyone when the results of the study were known. The school would need well over a

million euros to make all the buildings fit for the future – an astronomical sum for an institution that is reliant on donations. Priorities therefore needed to be set. For Reverend Khaled Freij, it was clear that the boarding home buildings should be refurbished first because “The children are the heart of Schneller,” says the Director of the TSS without hesitation.

The RSS was commissioned to separate the figures for the boarding home refurbishment from the survey. The RSS came up with a total sum of €755,000 for the general refurbishment and renovation of the rooms in the six residential groups, called families. From then on, this sub-project was pushed to the forefront and the refurbishment of the other buildings was earmarked for a later date.

Having accepted the basic principle that the TSS’s primary concern is for the children, the next logical step was to consider not only the technical refurbishment of the buildings, but also the question of how the rooms should be designed so that the children would feel comfortable and safe there.

Thankfully, the Director was able to take the first steps in this direction by drawing on ideas from a student competition organised by the Applied Science Private University in Amman three years ago to redesign the entire TSS site as well as the buildings. The results of this competition are still displayed on large posters in the school’s office building. “We were able to adopt some of the ideas for the interior design from this competition,” says Freij.



Everyone involved in the planning obviously has a lot of fun. Here Khaled Freij with the head of the boarding home Samer Batarseh and a group of boys discussing the new plans.

But that's not all. The children were also to be involved in subsequent planning and considerations. After all, they know best what is needed to make them feel comfortable. In autumn, Khaled Freij and his wife Rana, who has become a huge support in this project and without whom he says he would not have got anywhere near this far, organised an all-day workshop with the RSS, the teachers and over 60 children and young adults currently living at the boarding home. The volunteers from Germany were also involved, as well as some teachers – in other words, everyone who would be living or working in the rooms in the future.

The children were asked to comment on what they liked and didn't like based on detailed design proposals that the RSS had previously drawn up. A questionnaire with 24 questions helped to structure the statements into the areas of physical health, feeling of safety, social interaction and physical, cognitive and emotional well-being.

"We're pleased with the changes in the bedrooms," wrote one child, for example. Or, "More lights with different levels of brightness take away the feeling of anxiety." Or, "A centralised air conditioning system will improve the quality of the indoor air and help concentration when doing homework." The specific answers show how well the children were integrated in the planning process. "We are taking the feedback from the children and young adults very seriously," says Freij.

The workshop with the children and young adults was also uncharted territory for the architects and engineers involved. They had never planned a refurbishment in this way before. However, it was plainly obvious that the TSS is serious when it said that the children are at the centre of its work, and this evidently generated lasting enthusiasm for the school. One engineer did not charge the TSS for his services. Another persuaded his daughter to visit the school for a day.



TSS



Director Khaled Freij (centre), his wife Rana Freij (next to him in a pink blouse) and engineers and architects from the Royal Scientific Society present the workshop plans to the children.

Construction work has not yet begun. The first tenders for the individual trades are currently awaited. Work is scheduled to start in April and is expected to last a year. The boarding home will continue to operate during this time. The planners have assured us that this will be possible. The total costs of €755,000 for the project have nearly been reached. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Württemberg has provided a substantial portion and the

Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools is also contributing a large sum. Fortunately, the Association was awarded a number of bequests last year, allowing it to raise such a large sum. However, there is still a shortfall of €50,000. The Association will have to raise this money in the form of donations.

Katja Dorothea Buck

Obituary

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) bids farewell to two long-time friends of the Schneller work.

We have only just learnt of the death of Norman Schneller. The great-grandson of Johann Ludwig Schneller, founder of the Syrian Orphanage, died in June last year at the age of 84.

The EVS also mourns the loss of Hans Schniepp. He worked at both Schneller schools from the mid-1960s, for exam-

ple, he set up the electrical workshop at the Theodor Schneller School and later worked from Germany to promote further training for staff. He was very close to the schools and remained in contact with them until the end. Jamal Qandah, the former head of the workshop for car mechanics at the Theodor Schneller School, visited him in October last year. They enjoyed a long-standing friendship. Hans Schniepp died on 3 January at the age of 81.

The EVS will keep Norman Schneller and Hans Schniepp in grateful memory.

Letters to the Editor

Thank you very much for sending me all the Schneller issues from 2023. This gives me a more in-depth view of all the events in the Middle East.

The “hot off the press” issue 4/2023 is especially interesting and informative. In particular, I find Mrs Buck’s highly committed assessment of the current world situation very encouraging and “horizon-broadening”.

Rev. ret. Wolfgang Gokenbach, Aalen

With the title “Room in the inn” and the reflections on the current horrors in Israel, Palestine and the Gaza Strip, you have succeeded in producing an extremely valuable magazine. The fact that you matter-of-factly describe standing together in this time of crisis is the great challenge, although it is so radically questioned by Christians in particular, and that you oppose the widespread dogmatism and armchair comments, is a much needed wake-up call. It is evident that you are also emotionally moved by the turmoil and that mourning for the victims must first take centre stage. By contrast, the fact that the Schneller boarding homes are oases

of peace amidst all the tensions clearly comes to the fore as a prospect of hope in the sometimes very personal articles. So, thank you very much for the detailed portrayals, which I find very helpful.

Prof. Dr Johannes Lähmann, Goslar

Many thanks for another excellent issue of the Schneller magazine. It was particularly interesting to read all the wonderful details about life in the Syrian orphanage and later in the Schneller schools. The report about the organ at the Theodor Schneller School in Amman and that the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools is thus returning to its initial vision of supporting the culture of music at the Schneller Schools is equally encouraging.

Rev. George D. Haddad, Director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School, Lebanon

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“Let all that you do be done in love.”

1 Corinthians 16,14
(Annual Watchword 2024)



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