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SCHNELLER

MAGAZINE ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



HOPE DESPITE ALL THE DESPAIR

PEOPLE ON WHOM HOPES ARE PINNED IN THE MIDDLE EAST



EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools

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Dear Readers,

Four and a half years of civil war have cost the lives of 220,000 people in Syria; half of the population have fled their homes. The Islamic State spreads fear and terror even outside the areas they have conquered in Syria and Iraq; IS supporters carry out attacks all around the Mediterranean Sea. Egypt is in danger of breaking up in the balancing act between a rigid military regime and Islamist terror. And Palestine has been groaning under Israeli occupation for almost five decades without any prospect of an end to the nightmare. "Hope" is probably the last keyword that comes to mind when mention is made of the Middle East.



We were well aware of this when we chose this topic for this issue and asked: is there any hope left at all in this stricken region? What drives people to continue to strive for a good future despite all the setbacks? We stumbled across amazing stories and received articles from partners and friends in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Israel and Palestine as well as from the American diaspora. They all have this to say: hope is not synonymous with optimism. It is rather an attitude of accepting life with all its challenges.

The people responsible for carrying out Schneller work know better than most that without hope everything would be lost. Despite all adversity they do their utmost to give children from disadvantaged backgrounds a chance; or so that single Syrian refugee mothers in Lebanon can earn a living by sewing. We are also delighted we can include another historical article about the Syrian Orphanage in this issue. The search for a suitable photo took us from Stuttgart to America and to Jordan and from there to Lebanon – a great example of how international and how well the Schneller community has become in the meantime.

On behalf of the editorial team I wish you an enjoyable read in the new Schneller Magazine.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Katja Dorothea Buck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katja Dorothea Buck

HOPE BEYOND HOPE

Reconstruction after the Armenian genocide

When the Lebanese civil war started in April 1975, I was just nine years old and suddenly I had much too much time on my hands because the schools were closed for security reasons. My everyday life centred around reading. In those days, my father was reading an Armenian book entitled “The Orphan Built A Home” by Philip Zakarian. The title aroused my interest.

The book was a collection of short stories about Armenian genocide survivors who had no other possessions except for the memory of the homes and fields of their ancestors and – even worse – of their dear ones who did not survive. The stories described life in the refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon and in the orphanages which mission societies had built for them to provide thousands of orphans with a roof over their heads. The individual characters in these stories were described with such real details, the reader had the impression they were really alive. You could feel their bravery, whether they were old or young. They had gone through hell and had only survived by a miracle. Now the time had come to build up their lives again.

Astoundingly, they did not attempt to suppress the horrors and traumas they had experienced. The realised they should not let themselves be paralysed by their terrible experiences. Certainly they were victims, but they were also survivors. For their own sakes and for the sakes of their children, they had to carry on. They con-

centrated on survival and make the best of a very bad situation. This gave them strength and hope for a better future.

They did not allow their refugee status and atrocious conditions to take control of their lives. They did not let themselves be enslaved by what had happened. Although they had to live in rags, in tents and shacks, they showed a strong, unbreakable will. They had lost everything, but they had retained their faith and their dignity despite the rags and poverty. In hindsight they are proof that it is impossible to exterminate a people that was the first to declare Christianity as their state religion in the year 301 AD; a people that had survived many invasions and wars since its origins in the year 2400 BC.

But where do they get their hope for a better future? Why didn't they just give up? Why do they still fight for justice and acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide which had its centenary this year? Their faith in God was shaken but not destroyed. They had cried like Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But after their Golgotha they experienced a resurrection.

Little by little, the people who were left rebuilt their churches, schools and houses. The resurrected people revived their faith, their language and their rich cultural heritage. The prophetic vision of dry bones as described in Ezek 37:1-14 became reality in their lifetime.

Today, the Middle East is again in turmoil and reports about horrific events make one shiver in view of the evil that humans can inflict on one another. But as



Photo: Wikimedia Commons/American Committee for Relief in the Near East

Escaped from the genocide in 1915: Armenian refugee children in Syria wear clothes made from American flour sacks

so many Christian mission societies and NGOs assisted the Armenians to carry on, many are now helping a people that is totally devastated. This helps the people not to lose their hope in God and humanity. Christian charity is a marvellous gift that fulfils the ones that give and the ones that receive with an incredible hope which can overcome evil circumstances, look beyond the Here and Now and can see a better future.

The entire Christian faith is based on this kind of hope. The hope which we have in our resurrected Lord, who was crucified and overcame death, is a hope which death cannot vanquish. This is why we believe in our endless hope that God will wipe "every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

Shake Geotcherian lectures in Christian education and is Director of the Christian Education Resource Centre at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut.

HOPE WAS IN THE PAST

The President of Caritas Syria on the situation in Aleppo.

Aleppo has been in the crossfire between government and rebel troops for many years. Life for the people there has become a fight for survival. "Many have lost all hope. I try to stay in my Christian faith which is extremely shaken and damaged," says Chaldean Bishop Antoine Audo frankly.

When you speak to Bishop Antoine Audo of Aleppo, you meet a man whose despair is growing. "This is now my fifth year since the war began, my fourth as President of Caritas Syria," says the Bishop. "I continuously give interviews and so on; but to be honest with you, I don't see that it has any effect whatsoever..."

But the Syrian still grants these interview despite everything. The fact is that the people in Aleppo no longer have many other possibilities of bringing attention to their situation which is becoming more and more drastic by the minute. "What can be done? That is not an academic question but one to which an answer must finally be found! At the moment, Aleppo is facing two alternatives: either it falls to the armed groups which keep on attacking it and are becoming stronger and stronger." As bishop he has every reason to fear that then – as happened last summer in Mosul – all the Christians will flee from the city. "Or a political solution will be found, for Aleppo and of course for the whole of Syria. But the signs are distinctly pointing to war and not to a political solution," says Bishop Audo.



Photo: Church in need

Antoine Audo is Bishop in Aleppo and President of Caritas Syria.

War is gradually threatening the very existence of Christianity in Syria, he continued. Disastrous patterns which are known from neighbouring Iraq are being repeated in Syria. Violence is gaining ground especially in Christian districts, such as the district where he lives. This spring, on the night of the Orthodox Good Friday, the Suleimaniya district – which is completely Christian – was bombed. "And that was at night! There were dozens of people killed in their beds, whole houses collapsed. It was the first time that something of this magnitude has happened in our Christian districts," reports Audo. "This is why very many Christians fled towards the coastal region in panic. There was also a direct attack by armed groups on the Old City of Aleppo, on Farhat Square – named after a well-known bishop of the Renaissance – where three large cathedrals stand, the Maronite, the Catholic Greek and the Armenian Catholic cathedrals. All three cathedrals were almost completely destroyed and the bishops fled. For us these are clear messages we are being given: we want Christians to clear out of Aleppo!"



Syrian refugees queue up for a hot meal in Al-Nabek.

He believes that Turkey has granted or set up a safe haven for the Islamist rebels, so to speak, says the Bishop; the Islamists are financed by Saudi Arabia who wants to strengthen the Sunni presence against the Shi'ites in the struggle covering several countries. Christians are only in the way in this deadly trial of strength among Islamist groups. Bishop Audo does not contest the fact that Turkey is strictly denying it is providing any support for Islamists in Syria. "That is merely propaganda! In actual fact they are bringing these groups together, training them – and the money for this is coming from Saudi Arabia and also from Qatar, that is blatantly obvious. No-one should fall for this propaganda which is driven by political interests."

In the past, Aleppo, the second largest city in the country, was once a proud metropolis. But that was in the past. Now it is grey, it lies in ruins, the inhabitants are all impoverished and they are struggling to survive. "Originally there were

150,000 Christians in Aleppo. This number has now fallen by two thirds, so there is only one third left, perhaps 50,000 people – I don't know exactly. In any case we have no more strength left to stay on, hold through or resist. At the beginning we were all filled with a certain hope – so was I. We hoped that some time in the future everything would culminate in a solution and reconciliation. But that has long disappeared. For myself, I am no longer in a state of hope but – shall we say – in one of faith. I try to hold on to my Christian faith which is extremely shaken and damaged."

This article was published by Vatican Radio on 18 May 2015.

FOR A NEW GENERATION

Why the Evangelical School in Aleppo was reopened

There is hardly any other city that suffers more from the Syrian civil war than Aleppo. What was formerly the economic capital of the country now lies mostly in ruins. The Presbyterian pastor Ibrahim Nseir describes what it means to be pastor in such a city.

To be pastor in these times has little to do with preaching," says Nseir on the phone. After mortar attacks he brings injured parish members to hospital, searches for accommodation for people whose homes have been destroyed or helps people who have no more money to buy food. "There has been no Internet for the past five months. There are frequent power cuts and in the middle of June the drinking water supply collapsed. Many people walk through the streets with empty canisters in search of something to drink," he relates. "But even if we cannot provide any practical help, we can still pray for the people and try to give them comfort," says Nseir.

In Aleppo government and rebel troops have been fighting for predominance since the end of 2012. The government controls the west of the city in northern Syria where the rebels have entrenched themselves in the East. One side or the other continually starts an offensive. Bombs fall every day. Every day there are people killed.

Once the northern Syrian city was a refuge for Christians fleeing from the Ottoman persecution in Turkey. One third of the roughly two million inhabitants have Armenian roots. The threat of Islamist troops in their immediate neighbourhood reminds them of the horror their ancestors had to live through a hundred years ago. Do they have to give up everything again? Those who flee in Syria cannot expect to return home at any time in the future. Many Christians who decide to flee give their house keys to their pastor or priest in the hope that he will prevent the final loss of their property. Sometimes the



Soon every parish in Aleppo becomes involved in emergency help for refugee families.



Ibrahim Nseir heads the Presbyterian parish in Aleppo.

priests pass on the keys to fully furnished homes to those who have lost all their belongings in the bombardment or are stranded in Aleppo on their flight.

Three quarters of the former 500 members of Ibrahim Nseir's parish have already left the city and have fled to western countries or to other parts of Syria. Now, the small parish can only celebrate worship service on the fifth floor of a block of flats. Right at the beginning of hostilities in November 2012, the historical Arab Evangelical Church in the Old City was bombed. On the same day, the Umayyaden Mosque was also destroyed.

As before, Nseir lives with his wife and three children aged from eight to 13 years old in Aleppo. "When we send our children to school in the morning, we don't know if we will see them alive again in the afternoon. We can only tell them that their safety lies in God's hands." Meanwhile, the children have crawled to their parents' bed every night because they are frightened of the bombs and they plead with them to finally leave the city. This is particularly painful to Nseir since he asks

himself what the remaining people in his parish would do without him. "As a church we are obliged to suffer along with the sufferers. We can comfort them by living and suffering with them."

The heart of the parish from time immemorial is the An-Nash' al-Jadeed school. After rebels fired on the building at the end of 2012, took away the furniture and destroyed the schoolbuses, the school had to close. But it was reopened in summer last year. Any financier would have advised against this since the school was sitting on an enormous mountain of debt. The number of children attending the school dropped drastically due to rising competition from private Islamic schools and so income fell. Added to this are debts from unpaid rent arrears amounting to hundreds of thousands of US dollars.

But since the autumn, 535 pupils now attend the school. 99 percent of them are Muslims. And they are the ones it is good to attract. Since it was founded many years ago, the school has pursued the aim "of building an educated, non-extremist society, of producing a generation with broad horizons and which is tolerant of others." This is exactly what Syria needs today, more urgently than ever before. And for the parish the reopening expresses a hope that service in Aleppo still makes sense.

Katja Dorothea Buck

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES!

The reply of a young Copt to the massacre of his fellow believers

Tony Rezk, an artist of Egyptian origin, created an icon in honour of those killed after the brutal beheading of 21 Christians in Lybia. It is a digital icon produced on computer. In his Internet blog the young Copt, who lives in the USA, tells what moved him to produce the icon.

While I was sitting with my parents in the kitchen on a cool Saturday afternoon, I switched on the TV and heard they were talking about a video which the IS had published in Lybia. The video showed the brutal beheading of 21 Orthodox Coptic Christians. When I wanted to watch the video on my iPad, my heart was in my mouth, I started to shake and I became terribly afraid. It was unreal to look at something which came over as a film, but in this case it was not actors but ordinary people who were led to execution by masked men. I realised I was looking at something which we as Coptic Christians have all grown up with: the stories of saints and martyrs who were beheaded because of their belief in Christ.

Of course the TV did not show the people actually being beheaded and personally I did not want to see it at all either. First, because I would become extremely angry. Second, because I could not physically stand to look at something like that. Nonetheless, I decided later that day to view the whole five minutes of the video. I saw a masked man speaking of the “enemy Egyptian church” to which I belong. He also said that this was a retaliation for something that happened in Egypt several years ago.



When I saw these Christian men forced to lie on their stomach and a knife cut their throats, I heard shouts of “Ya Rab Ya Yasoo”, which literally means when translated “My Lord, Jesus Christ.”. When I heard that, I was filled with pain, torment, disgust, anger and the greatest contempt. Honestly, nothing can describe what we all felt on that Sunday in the Coptic community when we saw 21 of our brothers slaughtered like animals. The extent of cruelty in the Islamic State is beyond all understanding and is certainly beyond any words.

One of my friends was also very angry and we spoke of our hate for these men

21 martyrs before Christ. The sea behind them is red with their blood. Stoles and crowns symbolise martyrdom. The men wore stoles like the Coptic deacons during the liturgy.



who had committed such a cowardly crime. We talked about how easy it is for us to hate them but how we were violating the teachings of Jesus who taught us to love our enemies, to bless them and not to curse them, and to pray for those who persecute us. Hate is a poison; once you allow it to get to your heart, it gradually destroys your senses, your feelings, your humanity and finally it takes power over your whole life. That is why the Lord commanded us to love our enemies, for our own sakes so that we learn to be pure and holy and full of love, like our Father in Heaven.

Tony Rezk

INFORMATION

The names of the 21 men who were beheaded by Islamist terrorists on a beach in Lybia in February 2015 – most of them came from very poor families in Upper Egypt. The Coptic Pope Tawadros II accepted them officially among the ranks of Coptic martyrs, including the Ghanaian Matthew Ayariga, the only non-Egyptian in the group. The Orthodox Coptic Church will commemorate the men in future on 15 February.

1. Milad Makeen Zaky
2. Abanub Ayad Atiya
3. Maged Soliman Shehata
4. Youssef Shukry Younan
5. Kirollos Boshra Fawzy
6. Bishoy Astafanous Kamel
7. Samuel Astafanous Kamel
8. Malak Ibrahim Sinyout
9. Tawadros Youssef Tawadros
10. Girgis Milad Sinyout
11. Mina Fayez Aziz
12. Hany Abdelmesih Salib
13. Bishoy Adel Khalaf
14. Matthew Ayariga
15. Gerages Samir Megally
16. Ezzat Boshra Naseef
17. Luka Nagaty Anis
18. Gaber Munir Adly
19. Esam Baddar Samir
20. Malak Farag Abraham
21. Sameh Salah Faruq

HELPLESS BUT NOT WITHOUT HOPE

How to preserve cultural diversity in the Middle East

For minorities in the Middle East such as the Armenians, Assyrians, Yazidis, Mandaean, the Shabak or Turkmen peoples, it is question of being or not being. Previous solutions, according to Emanuel Youkhana, have been merely combating symptoms. What is important is to finally get to the roots of the problem, as explained by the example of the Assyrian Christians.

So far everything that has been done at humanitarian, military and political levels only aims at combating the symptoms. If we do not deal with the roots of the conflict, the same disaster will repeat itself every few years or decades: Anatolia 1915, Semele 1933, Anfal 1988, Mosul and the Niniveh Plains 2014, the Syrian Khabour Valley 2015 – these are all links in a chain of suffering and persecution. In my opinion, the following points are important if we want a future which is based on justice and dignity for all.

► The future of the Iraqi and Syrian peoples should not be limited to the two options of a police state or a Sharia state. We deserve something better, namely a state where the constitution and jurisdiction guarantee the equality and dignity of all citizens, irrespective of their religious or ethnic identity.

► The curricula and education system must be reformed in view of non-Muslim and non-Arab population groups of which there are four in Iraq, for example. Jews, Mandaean, Yazidis and Christians lived in Iraq for centuries before Islam. But in Iraqi schoolbooks nothing is written about these indigenous peoples!

► The claim that dictatorial regimes are a protection for “minorities” is simply misleading. In fact dictatorships secure their power by misusing “minorities”.

We non-Muslim minorities must live under Islam in our countries. You Europeans have to live next to Islam. Certainly there is a difference whether you live under or next to Islam. In any case we must all live together in mutual respect for the other. The majority of Muslims coexisted peacefully with non-Muslim minorities and wants to continue doing so in future. We trust and rely on this majority. And in both cases we trust and hope that the Muslim elite will become more active.

For the future of minorities in the Middle East it is important that the international community and especially European countries acknowledge the genocide of 1915 as the European Parliament has done. Memory of the past must heal so that a future is possible. Denial cannot heal the collective memory of the victims, but acknowledgement can. We call upon the international community and especially Europe to support the value of human rights when they negotiate with countries where discrimination rules and human rights are disregarded.

As Assyrian Christians we call upon Europe to help us remain in our homes in Iraq and Syria. During this critical time, this also involves military intervention – whether you want it or not – to bring the region back under control and to create security. It also requires political support. In Syria the involvement of Assyrian groups is important and necessary in every



A village in Northern Iraq: 120,000 Christians fled from this region last summer alone.

political process so that our people notice that it has a voice. In Iraq there is collective demand for a separate government in the Nineveh Plains. The Assyrian Christians demand this together with the Yazidis and the Shabak people.

Economic support in the form of reconstruction and development programmes are also very important. Refugee quotas and resettlement programmes are not long-term solutions although they may be helpful in certain cases. But first we must solve the general problem which affects hundreds of thousands of people and several thousand years of cultural wealth and heritage. That will not be easy. I can only repeat myself: we may be helpless but we are not without hope. Then help us so that our hope stays alive!

Emanuel Youkhana is the Archimandrite of the Assyrian Church of the East and Head of CAPNI (Christian Aid Pro-gram Northern Iraq). This text is an extract from a speech which Youkhana held before the European Parliament at the end of April on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the Syrian uprising and the centenary of the genocide against the Armenians and Assyrians in 1915.

FROM THE NILE TO THE EUPHRATES

Christian think tank is working on a vision for the Arab world

The Middle East is in a deep crisis. For some, emigration is the answer. Others take refuge in religious fundamentalism. On the other hand the recently founded Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship in the Arab World (CAFCAW) is seeking ways for all people in the Middle East to have a better future.

There are enough negative headlines about the Middle East. This is why we would like to report about something positive here. Christian academics from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria have come together to develop a sustainable vision for the future of the Arab world. This is new and full of hope since normally Middle East analysts restrict themselves to worst case scenarios. At best they look at the future with the demand that something will NOT happen, e.g. the radicalisation of the entire region or the disappearance of religious and ethnic diversity in the Middle East. By contrast CAFCAW turns the tables and formulates a positive vision of a dynamic and active citizenship in which everyone has the same rights and obligations. With the document "From the Nile to the Euphrates" published in December 2014, the authors hope to give impetus to a Christian movement in the Middle East which could be joined by people of different denominations and various religious beliefs.

CAFCAW is the first think tank of its kind in the Christian community of the Middle East. Christian academics and up-coming scientists from the six coun-

tries of the Fertile Crescent have come together to think about their common destiny in the Arab World – supported by Muslim intellectuals. Church leaders remain outside on purpose because they have their own interests and would be limited to their own constraints. CAFCAW wants to analyse and discuss the challenges to the region freely and with the least emotion possible, and makes every effort to maintain scientific and achieve objectivity. "We cannot understand our reality through the lens of subjective religious interpretations," it says in the document. The authors are convinced that there is no religious solution for the predicaments in the region.

However this does not mean that CAFCAW excludes faith from its considerations. Quite the contrary: doctrine and citizenship should not be separated. The concept of citizenship should not only be discussed by human rights experts and secular groups. Rathermore, the question should be answered on how citizenship can be inspired, motivated and upheld by faith. The CAFCAW therefore represents the approach of a public theology which has never existed before in the Middle East. To disregard religious affiliation and belonging is to deny and exclude diversity, it says in the document. It calls for a "conscientious and dynamic faith", an enlightened understanding of faith "that will engage us socially to buttress active citizenship, and not to be an impediment to involved citizenship." The authors express their firm hope that Muslims in the Arab World can take a similar course of action to renew Islamic discourse "so as to render



Photo: Christian Kurzke

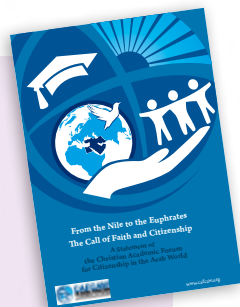
In the field of tension between death and new life: "Hope" by Gustav Klimt

it more supportive of citizenship in a modern, civil state."

The CAFCAW members are well aware that a single document is not sufficient. A dynamic and active citizenship is the result of a social process which exists in the awareness for peaceful resistance and a liberal attitude. They want to be part of this process. "Our region is in need of

From the Nile to the Euphrates A Statement of the Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship in the Arab World

www.cafcaw.org



investing in steadfast hope that is accompanied by serious and diligent work." Together they wanted to think, plan and work. In the last sentence of the document the Christians summarise how they position themselves in the Here and Now. "We believe, therefore we commit."

Katja Dorothea Buck

HOPE IS NOT THE SAME AS OPTIMISM

People committed to peace in Israel need a great deal of stamina

The peace process in Israel is stagnating and the divide between rich and poor is growing gradually wider. Despite the many setbacks there are still activists, both Jews and Arabs, who fight side by side for change and a better future for all the people in the country, such as Doron Gilad, for example.

Over the last five years, there have been two important moments in Israel when hope and a breath of change were noticeable. In 2011, hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets and demanded social justice. Thousands of demonstrators put up tents in the streets and lived in them for months. For the first time, the Israeli public showed solidarity. Many had the feeling that something would change for the good. But time went by, nothing was achieved and the protests ebbed away. Many people lost any hope of change. It is no surprise that many of the activities of that time now live abroad.

The second event was the parliamentary elections in March 2015. In the months running up to the election, the opposition had gradually gained in strength. The media had backed the general feeling that Netanyahu would not be the next Prime Minister of Israel. Even in the final polls before the election, he was regarded as the loser. Israelis from all over the world bought plane tickets to Israel only to be able to vote. But Netanyahu used his entire rhetorical arsenal. His strategy was to spread fear in the hearts of Israelis. He kept on repeating the same

mantra that Arab voters would storm the polling stations in hordes and that the people should vote for Likud, otherwise the Left would form a government with the Arabs and then bow down to Iran and the Islamic State. His tactic paid off. Netanyahu won the election with a large majority. The activists who had dreamt of change were first totally shocked. Then came the disillusion and finally many of them fell into fatalism and apathy.

I believe that Israeli peace and social activists can no longer afford to fall down on their knees whenever they fail. We have no other source of hope than to trust in ourselves. We do not believe that any God will help us or that the Messiah will soon come. Neither do we think that time will act in our favour and the nation will live for ever. Our only hope is to appeal to the every person's reason and convince as many people as possible of the importance of universal human and social rights. Yes, we will still fail time and again and many will lose hope. This is because we equate hope with optimism.

The usual definition of hope is based on an optimistic basic attitude which anticipates a positive result. Emile Habibi, one of the most important and influential Arab Palestinian intellectuals in Israel, wrote *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Peptimist in 1974*. He described the protagonist with an invented word "peptimist" – a combination of optimist and pessimist. Every time something bad happened to the hero, he thought that nothing worse could ever happen.



Photo: Uwe Gräbe

September 2011 in Jerusalem: hundreds of thousands demonstrate for social justice

This is the attitude we must adopt. We should fight for a better society and future without linking our actions to desirable results. Even if we perhaps don't manage to change reality for the better, the future would certainly be very much worse without us. We are a positive and moderate force which is trying to prevent the region from becoming an absolute catastrophe when it comes to human dignity. That is quite a hopeful idea. And the fact that we are carrying on is proof that hope will survive.

The Hebrew word for hope is *tiqwa* and consists of the root Q.W.I/h. As in many Hebrew words the meaning only becomes clear when we search for similarities in other Semitic languages. The same root in Arabic is "to be strong". Perhaps this is the actual meaning of hope in Hebrew: we have to be strong to keep hope alive.

For me personally it means not giving up when you fail and discovering the positive aspects and opportunities in our failure. We have no guarantee that we will be successful in the end. But this country and

its people mean too much to us that we can afford to give up hope. Who knows, perhaps one day we will have the luck to reach our goal: peace, freedom and equality for all.

Doron Gilad is a political scientist and has worked for several NGOs in Israel. He is currently working for an SPD member of parliament in Germany.

SIGNS OF HOPE

The Schneller schools and the wildfire in the Middle East

The entire Middle East resembles an unprecedented wildfire from Lybia in the south west to the Nineveh Plains in the north east. Can such a situation stay completely without any effects on the confidence, creativity and stability of our partners in Lebanon and Jordan? Hardly.

It is more difficult than ever to maintain togetherness and mutual respect between the various religious communities in the Middle East. For example, the current training course for single Syrian refugee mothers at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon only started after a delay of six months. Many reservations against the mainly Sunni women first had to be cleared. All in all the JLSS has found that even small children have already experienced of violence and religious marginalisation. The fundamental question here is how educators in the residential school should deal with this. Should they not work much more intensively with the original families of these children?

We have reported several times about the difficulties in finding a new candidate for the post as Director at the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman. Sadly there is still no final solution. Reverend Khaled Freij continues in his position as temporary director and the Anglican Archbishop has not yet been able to liberate him from his full post as parish priest in Zarka. It seems that the lack of a strong guiding hand at the TSS is unfortunately making itself noticed, especially in the vocational training sector. In the metal-

working shop for example, there were no graduates this year.

But there are also signs of hope. In the midst of all these difficulties, Khalida Mes-sarweh, head of the day school, Bishara Tannous, head of the residential home and Victor Kiddees, head of the guest-house together with Reverend Freij have established a functional "island". The participation approach which Khalida Mes-sarweh and Bishara Tannous use to give educators and teachers joint responsibility in the residential home and in the day school is just as positive an impact as a culture of appreciation. For example recently, Bishara Tannous organised an evening barbecue after a long day to thank those who worked far beyond the call of duty for the school. The guest-house continues to earn good money for the common task. But the most important of all is that the children at the TSS are doing well!

Sometimes people ask me why we do not "interfere" in TSS matters since we are the German partners. This we cannot do. The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) is a promotional association, not a sponsoring association. Our intention is to find joint solutions to problems at the school in the local board of governors of the TSS, which consists of nine members including the EVS President and the EMS Middle East Liaison Officer who represent the German promoters.

Meanwhile, the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem has appointed an inspector for all institutions in the diocese. It is his duty to evaluate all sectors of the TSS with a small team and submit proposals for



Photo: EMS/Katja Buck

The most important of all is that the children are doing well at the Schneller schools.

restructurisation. One idea is to concentrate work on the day school, the residential home and the guest-house for a limited period of time and rent out the remainder of the property. The quality of work in the smaller area would then be significantly improved by making specific investments. Later it would be possible to expand again to include economically viable sectors such as vocational training. A member of the Jordanian Committee for Vocational Education informed us that the last reforms to the state education centre were now considered to have failed. In future, Jordan also needs private and church initiatives such as the Schneller school.

In short, these are good prospects. In order to implement them however, the two Schneller schools in Jordan and Lebanon continue to need your donations. We are grateful for the opening collections

during the last church congress in Stuttgart. They were passed on to the two schools (see p 23). But it needs more than just donations if the schools are to continue to set an example for successful coexistence between disadvantaged children of totally different religious and social origins. It needs many prayers, personal compassion – and above all - the unbreakable hope that God will provide children in the Middle East, for whom we bear a small part of the responsibility, with a future in dignity.

Uwe Gräbe

BLAZE IN REFUGEE CAMP

Fire destroys the belongings of 93 families

On 1 June 2015, a major fire broke out in a refugee camp not far from the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Lebanon. Many people lost all their possessions. Some of the women attending the sewing course at the JLSS were also affected.

The misery of the refugees in Lebanon is never-ending. Recently, two participants from the sewing course for single refugee women came to me and asked for financial help to rebuild their tents which had been destroyed in the blaze at the Al-Marj camp. Although I had heard about this in the news, I did not realise it had affected some of our women.

I called one of the participants from the previous sewing course with whom we still were in contact to check the information. She came to my office and confirmed there had been a major fire at the Al-Marj camp at midday on 1 June and that 93 tents had been totally destroyed. Three refugee mothers from the sewing course last year had lost every-thing and the tents of two other women were only partially damaged.

No-one knew how the fire had started. When the first gas bottle exploded, the fire quickly got out of control. Added to this was the fact that the tents were made of nylon or polyester sheeting and wood and were very close to each other. Panic broke out in the camp. Fire and smoke was everywhere. People ran in every direction. The woman in my office described in tears how her new refrigerator and her new



washing machine which she had bought with money from her earnings had gone up in flames before her eyes. Despite the tragedy of the enormous damage, I was delighted to hear that thanks to our sewing course they had been able to afford such purchases in the first place.

The desperate woman continued her description of the terrible conflagration. While the men tried to save children and old people, the women cleared their few possessions out of the tents and onto a free space. Later, they then found out that Bedouins had stolen most of the things they had saved. It is incredible and I just cannot understand how terrible people can be to other people.

The fire destroyed everything.



The fire raged from tent to tent. One gas bottle after the other exploded and fuelled the fire even more. When a helicopter came, everyone first thought someone had finally come to put out the fire. But it was a TV crew who had come to film the terrible scenes. They flew a small drone with a camera above the fire and its down-draught just fanned the fire to start up again. What made matters even worse were the car and lorry tyres which the refugees had used to weigh down the sheeting on the tents to prevent them from being blown away by the wind. Everything was smouldering. It must have been a hellfire.

A two year old child died of smoke poisoning and eleven children and an old woman were treated in a nearby hospital. International aid organisations supplied the refugees with wood and sheeting so that they could rebuild their tents. However people only actually received help if they had officially registered. Those who had not registered, received nothing. The wood for the tents was also full of wood-worm. The refugees were afraid that the wooden supports would collapse under the weight of snow during the winter. The sheeting was also so thin that it ripped in the sun. Everything must be replaced before winter sets in.

Reverend George Haddad is director of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School.

INFORMATION

The Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) supports refugee women to rebuild their tents after the terrible fire of 1 June 2015 with a sum of 10,000 Euro.

Last year, the Johann Ludwig Schneller School started offering sewing courses for women from Syria who have to bring up their children alone through these difficult times. For three months, they learn the basics of tailoring, which, on completion of the short training course, gives them the chance to earn a small income. During their training they come to the school every day with their children, receive something to eat there and can also use the washrooms.

FAMOUS FOLKLORISTS

The intellectual heritage of the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem

When it comes to folklorists in Palestine, the names of Tawfiq Canaan, Elias Haddad and Stephan Stephan are closely linked. They were some of the first people to research the culture and history of the common people in Palestine in the first half of the 20th century. But there are other links between these three persons. They were all pupils at the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem. The upbringing they received there shaped their lives.

Tawfiq Canaan is the most famous of the three. His enormous ethnographical work – comprising more than a hundred articles and scripts – and his high standing as a medical doctor in Jerusalem during the British Mandate have aroused the interest of several researchers. Canaan is regarded as the most important person to record the rural culture of his time. He drafted detailed

anthropologies of religions and wrote about popular beliefs, architecture, the role of women and other topics. He was an educated man with a medical degree from the American University in Beirut and had no scruples in taking part in intellectual debates with the most important scholars of his time in the Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society.

Tawfiq Canaan also had close ties to the Syrian Orphanage. His father, Bishara Canaan, had come to the orphanage from Lebanon in 1860; perhaps he was one of the first group who was brought to Jerusalem by Johann Ludwig Schneller. Bishara and Johann became friends and Bishara belonged to the group which founded Bir Salem in 1875 where the Schneller school built its rural retreat. As Lutheran priest of Beit Jala, Bishara Canaan was one of the first Arab churchmen in Palestine. As an alumnus of the Schneller school he decided in the 1890s that his son Tawfiq should also be educated there.



Education in the Syrian Orphanage shaped the three well-known folklorists.

The second of the three people, Elias Haddad, was also sent from Lebanon to the orphanage in Jerusalem. He kept very close ties with the school. He became teacher there, later Head of Arabic and finally head of the whole school. When the

German director was interned at the start of World War II, Haddad helped to keep the orphanage running. After the founding of the State of Israel, he was also there to build the Schneller school in Khirbet Qanafar in Lebanon.

The third in the group was Stephan Hanna Stephan. Very little is known of his life. From letters between him and the Finnish anthropologist Hilma Granqvist, he was confirmed by Theodor Schneller in 1908 when he was “just a 14 year old rascal”. Like Tawfiq Canaan he was a prolific writer on Palestinian customs, especially in the fields of music and songs.

Even when Haddad and Stephan are only mentioned in connection with Canaan’s ethnographical works, the two should also be acknowledged for their broadly based contributions. In 1909 Elias Haddad translated the biography of his father Johann, founder of the Syrian Orphanage, into Arabic. The book had been written by Ludwig Schneller in 1904. A much more significant work in the cultural sense is Haddad’s translation of Lessing’s play “Nathan der Weise” (Nathan the Wise) published in 1932 (our article, see SM 1/2011) which contained the message of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims.

What is also rarely mentioned is Haddad’s work side by side with the American scholar Henry Spoer. Spoer had collected poems by the Bedouin poet Nimr Ibn Adwan from the early 19th century and therefore contributed to preserving many of these works of art for subsequent generations. Stephan made an important contribution to the collection and translation of Palestinian folk songs. His articles are still quoted today.



Elias Haddad with his wife Astrasia in the early 1920s.

Haddad and Stephan were also pioneers in teaching spoken Arabic. In their textbooks they brought their language to life for others. Finally the travel guides which Stephan Stephan wrote about Palestine, Syria and Lebanon in the 1930s and 1940s paved the way in which his country was viewed by visitors from abroad. Both deserve to come out of the shadow of Tawfiq Canaan and be acknowledged for their own important work.

Sarah Irving is a journalist, editor and translator currently researching the lives of Canaan, Haddad and Stephan for her doctorate thesis at the University of Edinburgh. She looks forward to receiving any information about these three persons. (Email: s1152211@sms.ed.ac.uk)

MORE TOGETHERNESS, MORE EDUCATION

The EVS stand at the Church Congress in Stuttgart.

Many events at this year's church congress in Stuttgart broached the issue of the situation in the Middle East. The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) was intensively involved in the organisation and orientation of the contents.

The 35th German Protestant Church Congress in Stuttgart will probably remain in the memories of most of the 100,000 visitors because of the sweltering heat. Record temperatures were measured in the marquees in the Opportunity Bazaar. The EVS presented its work on the lavishly designed stand shared with the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) directly next to the tent entrances. The fresh air attracted many people who made use of the opportunity to rest for a while over a cup of tea or coffee and Oriental pastries in the Café Salam and find out about Schneller work at the same time. They were provided with news about the Schneller schools and the entire region during short interviews with guests from partner churches. "The current situation in the Middle East is very tense and diffuse. War is all around us and we do not know what will happen in the future," said Dr. Habib Badr, Senior Pastor of the National Evangelical Church in Beirut, in his interview with Klaus Rieth, the Wuerttemberg member of the EKD High Consistory, and member of the EMS Mission Council.

Reverend Khaled Freij and is currently head of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman travelled from Jordan. "In particular we are concentrating our help

on children who come from broken families," he said. At the TSS they receive special support from psychologists. "Together with the EMS and EVS we help them achieve a better future and become responsible members of society."

An EVS panel discussion dealt with the issue of how far education can be a recipe for extremism in the Middle East. Dorothee Beck, Head of Education at the Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS), explained the principles of Schneller work in the Middle East. More than 40 Syrian refugee children have been attending the JLSS since 2012. "Religion is not the decisive factor for accepting a new pupil," said Beck. Muslim and Christian children are taught together. This helps them learn how to understand and respect each other. Khaled Freij from the TSS also expressed the hope that his pupils would live in peace and harmony and in mutual respect after they left school.

During the thematic day on the Arab Region which the EMS and EVS helped to prepare and organise, Bishop Dr. Elias Toumeh from the Valley of Christians in Syria clearly pointed out the impacts of the civil war on coexistence between religions. "Before the crisis we made no distinction between Christians and Muslims, we were all Syrians," he said. And Shaykh Dr. Muhammad Habash, Sunni scholar and former member of the Syrian parliament, explained the difference between conservative and radical Muslims: "Conservatives believe there is only one true religion, but they do not take up weapons to assert their convictions." On the other hand,



Photo: EMS/Regina Karasch-Böttcher

Klaus Rieth (centre) talking to Khaled Freij (left) and Habib Badr (right) on the EVS stand about the role of the Schneller schools in the Middle East.

radicals believed they had to fight humanity and convert everyone to Islam. He described himself as a moderate Muslim: “We believe that there is one God with many names,” he said. “We must struggle against any form of monopolisation.”

Prof. Dr. Tarek Mitri, former Lebanese Minister and Special Ambassador to the UN Assistance Mission in Lybia, stressed that there were also nascent forces which stood up for equal civil rights and national unity. These civil society efforts for a political solution deserve more attention, he said and emphasised again that the future of Christians in the Middle East was only

possible together with Muslims. “Neither a mass emigration of Christians to the West nor the establishment of a Christian state can be envisaged as a solution,” said Mitri.

EVS Managing Director Uwe Gräbe reviewed the clear statements of the Middle East representatives as very positive. “They are clear signs against the inevitability of further fragmentation of the Middle East,” he said. The future could only exist in a coexistence which does not mean merely living next to one another.

*Katja Dorothea Buck, Elisa Heiligers,
Corinna Waltz*

INFORMATION

The Presidium of the German Evangelical Church Congress has assigned collections from opening worship services to reconciliation work at the Schneller schools. A total of 133,000 Euro was collected. The EVS and all those engaged in Schneller work would like to express their extreme gratitude.

BECOME A MEMBER OF THE

EVS!

The "Evangelischer Verein für die Schneller-Schulen e.V." (Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools, EVS) sup-ports 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 professional training at the Schneller Schools.

In its publications and events, the EVS provides information about churches and Christians in the Middle East. The Schneller Magazine is published four times a year and can be subscribed free of charge. Speakers for lectures on topics featuring the work of the schools can be booked from the EVS Secretariat.

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. 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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**EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools**



INVITATION TO ATTEND THE 2015 SCHNELLER FESTIVAL

The Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools (EVS) invites you this year not to the Stuttgart region as usual but to Ulm. All EVS members and friends of Schneller work are cordially invited

TO ULM ON 8 NOVEMBER 2015

the beautiful city on the Danube.

All EVS members will receive a written invitation in good time.

PROGRAMME:

- 9.30 **Celebratory service** in the Ulmer Münster.
Sermon: Prelate Gabriele Wulz
- 11.00 **Welcoming coffee** at the Haus der Begegnung, Grüner Hof 7, Ulm;
welcoming address by Andreas Stoch MdL, Minister for
Culture, Youth and Sport of the State of Baden-Württemberg
(invited)
- 11.30 **Slideshow:** news from the Schneller schools in the
Middle East (Part 1 of official Annual General Meeting of the EVS)
- 12.30 **Lunch;** followed by coffee
- 14.00 **Annual General Meeting** of the Evangelical Association for the
Schneller Schools (EVS), Part 2
- 15.00 **Lecture:** Prof. Dr. Herta Däubler-Gmelin, Federal Minister of Justice
(retired): "Religion and Human Rights in the Upheavals in the Arab
world"; followed by debate
- 16.30 **Travel blessing**



**EVS Evangelical Association
for the Schneller Schools**

CIVIL SOCIETY UNDER PRESSURE

Activists from Lebanon, Syria, Israel and Palestine report

The civil societies in the countries of the Levant are under pressure – albeit at different levels of intensity. At the Protestant Academy Bad Boll at the beginning of July, activists from the Middle East reported on the challenges facing NGOs in view of repression and increasing violence. It became clear that European civil societies will be obliged to come on board!

The Lebanese security forces refused to renew Sara Abou Ghazal's travel documents because she was "under observation" due to her activities as an activist. Sara had intended to contribute to the conference organised by the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) with her paper entitled "The State of the States – on the Relations between State and Civil Society in the Middle East". However, her activities on behalf of disadvantaged groups such as refugees and foreign domestic workers prompted the Lebanese state to prevent her voyage to Germany.

This case is an example of how strong the relations between the state and the civil society are marked by surveillance and suppression in many countries in the Middle East. The extent of intervention varies depending on the country. Mohammad Matar, youth activist from the Gaza Strip, gave an impressive description how civil activism is suppressed by the ruling powers – both by the Hamas as well as by the Israeli military.

Similar to Mohammad, Raji Abdel Salam the Lebanese humans rights



Photo: Forum Deutschland-Israel-Palästina, Tobias Pietsch

observer living in Beirut received the full force of the state authorities. He has already been arrested several times. The Lebanese military courts have sentenced him for bringing the reputation of Lebanon into disrepute, at least that is the reason given. Raji had brought to public attention how many women in Lebanon experienced domestic violence in Lebanon.

Constant in mortal danger

The current situation in Syria is even more dramatic. Every form of civil activism is suppressed by the Assad Regime, reported Abdallah Shaar, who was forced to flee his country in October 2014 after several terms in prison and threats to his life. Those who set up independent schools,

Already reality In Bad Boll: exchange of views between civil activists from the Middle East and Europe.



disseminate alternative media or coordinate aid programmes in occupied areas are persecuted and in constant danger of being killed. Despite all this, stressed Shaar, the civil society continued to be active especially in the humanitarian and education sectors – both in areas under Regime control as well as in areas controlled by the so-called “Islamic State”.

In Israel the civil society can act with relative freedom, said the young political scientist Doron Gilad. Nonetheless the Israeli pointed out that left wing and peace oriented NGOs were often defamed as instruments of foreign interests by right wing groups and by the government. Reiner Bernstein, representative of the Geneva Initiative in Germany, added that

during the Gaza war, left wing civil society activists had also been the victims of physical attacks by right wing nationalist Israelis.

Important contacts made

It was clear in all the contributions by speakers from the Middle East region that civil society organisations were often heavily dependent on financial support from abroad. This circumstance only became a problem when financial support was linked to an extremely political agenda.

But the activists agreed that one thing that was more important than financial support was exchange with the civil society here in Germany. This was the only way to attract credible attention for the sometimes very precarious situation of the civil society in the Levant. The best way to support the people there was through PR work, networking, knowledge transfer and personal assistance in local initiatives.

Important contacts were made at the well attended conference. Now the task is to develop concrete exchanges and projects. The participants discussed the first initiatives in the workshop which followed the conference. Contacts were then exchanged for refugee work and new strategies were devised in joint discussions to support local initiatives in Syria and Lebanon.

Christoph Dinkelaker

WHISPERED BEHIND RAISED HANDS

What people are reluctant to talk about in the Middle East

The terrorist militia Islamic State (IS) are just before the border to Lebanon and Jordan. How do people in the two countries deal with this? Outsiders have difficulty understanding many of the answers. But outsiders feel the Islamic threat not as directly.

In Jordan many reply to the question about the IS almost defiantly: “The Royal Family will never allow our country to be taken over by the Islamists. It will make sure that Christians and Muslims continue to live in harmony with each other.” This statement does nothing to satisfy the questioner. For if a joint future is to be a long-term future for Christians and Muslims, it needs more than just the admittedly clever politics and hard hand of the Jordanian royal family.

In a different way than Jordan, Lebanon is suffering from the chronic instability of its state institutions. The uncertainty is almost palpable. “Nobody can stop the Islamists now,” I was told at the end of May in Beirut when IS troops had just conquered the antique Syrian desert town of Palmyra. Meanwhile, many people in Lebanon are making very concrete plans to emigrate. Others are at least obtaining a European or American visa just in case.

Roughly one in four inhabitants in Lebanon is a refugee from Syria. But still we rarely hear the plea from our Christian brothers and sisters there that Europe should generally take in more refugees. Their criticism is totally different. Even after the apparently unstoppable advance



A beautiful but threatened unity: the cross of the Chaldean cathedral in Aleppo between the minarets of a mosque.

of the IS, it is simply not acceptable that “so many Muslims” are being allowed to enter Europe. One person saying as much has herself been working for decades with – mostly Muslim – Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. I asked how this attitude fitted in with her own commitment. “That’s something totally different,” she said indignantly. “In a few years’ time, the last Christians will have to flee from the Middle East. What other prospects will there be for us then except Europe?” And then it should be a Christian Europe where we would not have to struggle again against Muslims for our own place in society. The

hurt behind such statements is not shown willingly in public.

During a discussion event in Germany, Christian and Muslim speakers were unanimous in stressing that both Christians and moderate Muslims were equally persecuted by the Islamic State, that they could only stand firm together for a democratic, pluralist future for societies in the Middle East and that only moderate Muslims could guarantee a future for Christians in the Middle East. All that is correct! But the other facts are also correct. The fact that many Christians in areas conquered by the IS experienced so many of their previously moderate Sunni neighbours suddenly joining the side of the persecutors, plunderers and murderers. And that a self-critical discourse about this fact has only been rudimentarily discussed so far in Islam.

People are not prepared to say anything else in public. A Christian friend stated her position in favour of the Assad Regime with too much wholeheartedness, in our opinion. We had no way of knowing that privately and secretly she was trying to protect a relative from conscription in the military. Or a Muslim acquaintance professed perhaps a little too loudly to be all in favour of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims. Only during evening meal did I discover in private that this man, who had previously belonged to the moderate Syrian opposition so far tolerated by the Regime had had to flee abroad at the spur of the moment. Militia men close to the Regime had demanded his death. Now he had to somehow pro-

tect the family members he had left behind.

In Europe however, we can still guess most of what people in the Middle East carry in their hearts. Perhaps that is why we lack the emotional dimension of solidarity which many of our Christian brothers and sisters in the region expect so much from us. But there is still the principle of Christian brotherliness: Christians from the Middle East must receive from us the certainty that they will find open doors in Europe without reservation when they must flee from their ancestral home – and all of them will receive every conceivable support if they want to stay in their homeland despite all the dangers. Beyond that there are also human rights which have solid roots in Christianity. They are universal and unalterable. Or in theological terms: since each person is made in God's likeness, that person deserves the dignity which must be protected in all cases. For this reason the asylum laws may be more or less strict – but they may not make any distinction between persecuted Christians, Muslims, Yazidis or those of no religion.

Uwe Gräbe

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Please visit us on the Internet at www.evs-online.org



Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.

Psalm 73:23



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