

Bonner Querschnitte

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Evangelical leader supports tourism to Jordan and prays for Christian unity

(Bonn, 31.08.2023) The Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has offered to support the efforts to bring Christian tourists, to help restore archaeological sites that have a biblical connection and called on evangelicals to seek Christian unity.

In an exclusive video interview, Bishop Dr. Thomas Schirmmacher said that he has a senior advisor who is a biblical archaeologist who would look positively at working with the Jordanian ministry of tourism and antiquities. “We should do something in Jordan and yes, we would need to work with the government with some vital plans and that means that Jordan will benefit from getting many tourists who will come to see those sites, and when they come, they will also see the country itself.”



Bishop Dr. Thomas Paul Schirmmacher © WEA/Schirmmacher

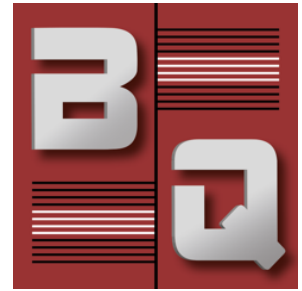
The Interview was conducted on the sidelines of the third general assembly of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) branch of the World Evangelical Alliance held at the Ajloun Baptist Center in Jordan Sept 26–28, 2022.

The bishop complained about ‘biblical illiteracy’ around the world. “One of the easiest ways to overcome that is to bring people to the real sites where Biblical history happened. For people coming from places where you no longer hear biblical stories, they will listen to biblical stories.”

In response to a question about the presence of over a hundred sites in Jordan mentioned in the Bible, Schirmmacher answered in the positive. “Of course, you are right. If I take a map and put dots where something happened in the Bible, it is amazing how many of these sites will be in Jordan. Yes, if there is a good plan behind it.”

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The leader of an organization with six hundred million registered evangelicals scoffed at some of the less knowledgeable members of his Christian community. “There are evangelicals who only see churches as what were founded in the 19th century. But we are aware that our history goes back many centuries.” Schirmmacher speaking in the Jordanian town of Ajloun said about Jordan and other MENA countries “this was the very first area where the gospel was preached.”

The German-born bishop had words of praise for Jordan. “Jordan plays an important role as being a country with a King whose family origins go back to the Prophet Muhammad. It is a Muslim country ... whose leaders are involved in trying to find solutions.”

The head of world evangelicals welcomed the growth of evangelicals in the Arab world and noted that in addition to the success of the MENA branch of WEA, there are many Arabs in leadership positions within the evangelical organization he heads. “We have a representative of the MENA region in our International Council, and we have someone from Lebanon representing us in Geneva in the Human rights council and we have someone from Egypt representing us at the United Nations in New York. Arab-speaking Christians are very well represented in all our structures, sitting on the table.”

The CEO of the World Evangelical Council expressed strong empathy for the Palestinian people. “If you live in Bethlehem and you see the wall, it is easy to understand how they feel like they are in a big prison.”

Asked what he would say to some American Evangelicals if he was born a Palestinian. “I come from Germany and the perspective of evangelicals in Germany on Palestinians is quite different than that of the US evangelicals.” He said that if he was born a Palestinian the talk about prophecies and the future would not change everyday reality. “I think the same Christians who are critical of Palestinians would do the same thing if they lived here.”

Bishop Schirmmacher called on evangelicals to help heal the differences between Christians in the Middle East. “If this region needs something it is that that all believers sit together, pray together and say despite all the political differences and all the life experiences it is the same Jesus we believe in and it is the same Jesus that forgives our sins and it is the same Jesus that promises us that he would tear down the walls between us and make one body of it. This is my prayer for the MENA region that Christians that come together.”

The word-for-word transcript of the interview

Q: What is the interest of the World Evangelical Council in the MENA region?

A: First When we talk about the origin of our faith, about Jesus dying on the cross we realize that this is part of the origin of our faith. Going back to the Old Testament many things happened in the MENA region and here is Jordan where we are now. Number two we also realize that this land is the historic origin of our churches. There are evangelicals who only see churches as what were founded in the 19th century. (laughs). But we are aware that our history goes back many centuries, and this was the very first area

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where the gospel was preached. Jesus says go to Judea and Samaria and this means this area as well. There is a time in history pre-Islam that this was the most Christian area even during the Ottoman empire this was still Christian kingdoms here so there is a historic site.

Q: As an evangelical body where do Arabs from Palestine and Jordan fit within the WEA?

A: As the World Evangelical Alliance we do not have a structure following numbers. We might have the same vote for every national alliance and so countries in the MENA region already have some weight. We very much follow not so many national questions, but we follow ethnic groups and languages and dialects.

Q: That is why I asked you where Arabs in this region fit within WEA.

A: Arab people have been one of the very large ethnic groups that have been dispersed. We cannot pinpoint one country and say this is the Arab country. So, to miss this out in our structure we have a representative of the MENA region in our International Council, and we have Arabic-speaking Christians in different leadership positions. We have someone from Lebanon representing us in Geneva in the Human rights council and we have someone from Egypt representing us at the United Nations in New York, so I can tell that Arab-speaking Christians are very well represented in all our structures, sitting on the table. There is a lot of experience in this region with discrimination with how to deal with these problems. But this is a region that has a long history of churches. So, you have churches not from these areas but churches that for centuries have gone through problems, and my experience that in central Asia, churches have many problems, and these churches can learn a lot from the experiences of the churches in the MENA region and how they have survived all these centuries.

Q: You are in Jordan. What do you think of the Jordanian government, His Majesty and what do you see WEA doing in Jordan?

A: This is a tricky question because when a country hosts me and I am asked to comment on the country, I have to be polite and say nice things. Seriously, Jordan plays an important role as being a country with a King whose family origins go back to the Prophet Muhammad. So, it is a Muslim country but not an extremist country. It is a country whose leaders are involved in trying to find solutions. So, Jordan proves that you can be a hardcore Muslim country without transporting violence to other countries. I am not saying it is easy, the government is fearing the extremists in the country too much when it comes to dealing with the situation of Christians, I think that they can give some freedom, especially to Evangelical churches without endangering this course. But I think that when we speak on behalf of Evangelical churches it is not about the evolution of how this can become a western country, but I travel a lot in the Muslim world, and I say that there are other ways of doing it.

Q: Jordan has the baptismal site and other sites mentioned in the Bible. Is the WEA willing to work with the Jordanians to develop these sites? There are over

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one hundred sites mentioned in the Bible in Jordan. Is WEA willing to work to help develop these Christian sites in Jordan?

A: If you ask me the answer is: Yes. Why? Jesus comes first, second for evangelicals it is the Bible. We have bible illiteracy around the world and one of the easiest ways to overcome that is to bring people to the real sites where Biblical history happened. For people coming from places where you no longer hear biblical stories, they will listen to biblical stories. Of course, you are right that if I take a map and put dots where something happened in the Bible it is amazing how many of these sites will be in Jordan. Yes, if there is a good plan behind it, I have a senior advisor in Biblical archaeology for these very purposes because I am very interested in developing those things. We are working closely at the moment with Ghana to develop a Bible Museum and you know Ghana has zero places that appeared in the Bible. So, it is funny that we do a bible museum in Ghana but we should do something in Jordan and yes we would need to work with the government with some vital plans and that means that Jordan will benefit from getting many tourists who will come to see those sites and when they come they will also see the country itself. I am in Ajloun looking down here and the distance is not far from the Jordan river. We also have a Muslim minaret it is still very nice to see and visit.

Q: If you were born a Palestinian Christian and you hear evangelicals speaking against Palestinians what would you think?

A: Let me start on the personal level, I have spoken to many many Christians in this whole region. It is very easy to understand when you see the person. So, if you live in Bethlehem and you see the wall, it is easy to understand how they feel like they are in a big prison. Then I talk to the Israelis, and they say oh no they will shoot us if the wall is no longer there. I think that on the one hand, the Palestinians are living in a huge prison. Of course, there are Palestinians living here in Jordan and in Egypt and other parts. But they cannot live like other people, they cannot plan their vacation, they cannot go shopping say in Jerusalem and what I find amazing is that if you do manage to go to Jerusalem shopping you might find out two hours later that the situation has changed, and you cannot return home. On the other side, I think that the Palestinians do not understand that this is not the problem only of Israel there are other nations responsible too.

Q: But the question was what would you think if you were a Palestinian and heard what American evangelicals are saying about you?

A: America is a different thing. I come from Germany and the perspective of Evangelicals in Germany on Palestinians is quite different than that of the US evangelicals. If I were a Palestinian listening to all of this talk about prophecies and the future and so on all of which do not change everyday reality. And whatever prophecies I am living here and now, and my kids grow up here and now and I would establish that in the US a lot of things are talked about the future and if the same people live my reality as a Palestinian, they will know what the situation is like. I know many Palestinian families who would like their kids to live in this region, but they will know it is best for their kids to leave and they do not know what to tell their kids. The kids have no future, at least if the situation does not change totally, and yet on the other side who likes to have to tell their

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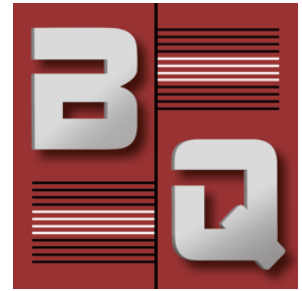
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kids that it is better for you to leave? This is a basic everyday reality, and you cannot counter with some biblical theology of verses, I think the same Christians who are critical of Palestinian Christians would do the same thing if they lived here.

Q: Would you like to say anything else?

A: The MENA region, one has to say critically, everyone would agree, is an area where Christians in history did fight more than anywhere else and still do. It is not far from reality, and it is a place where even Catholic churches and other oriental churches are. In this situation, it is of utmost importance it is that we evangelicals pray for unity, not in the sense that we are the better ones, and we show all others what to do. If this region needs something it is that that all believers sit together, pray together and say despite all the political differences and all the life experiences it is the same Jesus we believe in and it is the same Jesus that forgives our sins and it is the same Jesus that promises us that he would tear down the walls between us and make one body of it. This is my prayer for the MENA region there are Christians that come together but especially for those who claim to be believers in Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit and all the things that they say about us, that we prove it by especially striving for unity.

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1:** Bishop Dr. Thomas Paul Schirmmacher © WEA/Schirmmacher
- **Photo 2:** Bishop Schirmmacher during the interview © WEA/Schirmmacher
- The video interview by Daoud Kuttab in Ajloun (Jordan), filmed by Issa Dahdal: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNm6QFQKNF0>

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