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'Kindertreff' acquaints children with religious diversity

German congregation strives to stimulate youth's imagination and creative talents

By Jessica Bodmann

Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: For six years, the German-speaking Protestant congregation of Beirut has been organizing the Kindertreff, a Friday afternoon meeting for children and teenagers that is bound to neither confession nor to language. The program offers the children a room for creativity that most of them could not have otherwise, said Fredericke Weltzien, who holds the pastorate together with her husband.

"Our work is not missionary and this is not a Christian childrens' group," she said.

"We are not unreligious but rather a room where the interest for religion is very big," Weltzien added.

Weltzien has been working as parson at the congregation for nine years and notices growing interest in its work, especially from Lebanese families.

"Before the 2006 summer war, the German language and attitude prevailed in our work with the kids because there were many Germans living here in Beirut who participated in our meetings. But many of them have left because of the war and the trend to emigrate or to return to Germany is ongoing" she explained.

But word about the congregation's work has spread in Beirut and a growing number of Lebanese families are joining the weekly children's meeting.

"They are searching for some kind of counterpole to the depressive atmosphere for their children" Weltzien told The Daily Star.

"Our community performs an important function in this regard: We want to strengthen a spirituality that conveys the power against depression. One has to allow for fear and shock to be felt but at the same time one has to keep in mind that there is another truth, which is peace," added Weltzien, who has a degree in psychotherapy.

The program is also designed to give participating children an opportunity to develop their creative potential since, as the congregation's information material puts it, many schools in Lebanon do not usually place a high value on stimulating the imagination and the creative forms of expression.

Moreover, with their facilities and the adjacent backyard, it offers the children a small oasis of carefree childhood in a city that prefers to open yet another parking lot to a playground or public park for families, the material adds.

"Our activities for children vary throughout the year," Weltzien explained. "Around Easter for example, we color eggs with them and do handcrafts that you typically see in Germany around this time."

The Kindertreff wants to maintain German traditions and play culture and is therefore most interesting for German-speaking children.

"It is not the confession that connects the kids but the language and culture," Weltzien said. However, to be or to speak German is not a necessary condition to attend the Kindertreff and there are different nationalities represented at the meetings: "Not all of the children understand German, so when we read German stories to them, the ones who speak German explain and translate it for the others. It is really cute."

Weltzien considered the religious diversity that comes along with the growing heterogeneity within the Kindertreff as very important. "The children should learn that religious coexistence is something very valuable and nothing to be afraid of," she said.

With different religions being represented at the Kindertreff, it is very interesting and positive to see how the children display great curiosity in the beliefs of others and explore their own diversity in a playful and constructive way by bringing in their own ideas and asking critical questions, said Weltzien. "Children have a right to religion," she added.

The Daily Star - - 'Kindertreff' acquaints children with religious diversity

But the Kindertreff is not merely a place for children to engage in playful activities like singing, dancing, theater plays or outside games. The congregation also welcomes their parents and encourages them to get involved in the planning and organization of the meetings. But that is not a must and sometimes the parents just come in to have a coffee and to exchange their experiences while the children are playing in the courtyard.

"Basically, we are doing a lot of social work here," said Weltzien, who partly grew up in Lebanon and feels very attached to the country and its people. "The Lebanese are very warm-hearted and Lebanon is such a beautiful country. It hurts me to see it in this tragic condition and I'm suffering with it," she added.

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