



A token of friendship

Christians make donation to the LJGH Hamburg Reform community

Rabbi Moshe Navon and Provost Karl-Heinrich Melzer celebrate Shabbat together. The Hamburg-West/Südholstein parish is donating EUR 3,000 to the Hamburg Reform Jewish community for the planting of the community's new plot in Hamburg's Ohlsdorf cemetery. The community has also received EUR 1,000 from the Heilig-Geist-Gemeinde Pinneberg for its social work.

By Catharina Volkert

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Karlinenviertel, Hamburg. Provost Karl-Heinrich Melzer is wearing a kippah and smiling warmly at the faces of the congregants of the LJGH Hamburg Reform community. Where a faithful congregation of 20 or so usually gather for Kabbalat Shabbat, the service of song to welcome the Jewish Sabbath, there are 50 guests here tonight. "How we deal with death reveals how we cherish life," the Provost says. Protected by a security guard outside, life is what it's all about inside this building – life within the Liberale Jüdische Gemeinde Hamburg, or LJGH.

A real community needs its own cemetery – everyone here is agreed on that. This is why the congregation acquired its own plot within Ohlsdorf cemetery. Much of the large-scale planting of the plot is being financed by the Hamburg-West/Südholstein parish with its donation of EUR 3,000.

A socially active Christian, Ursula Büttner, heard about the donations drive, which was making slow headway among the North German Jewish community. Büttner is a frequent guest of the community. She celebrates Shabbat here on Fridays and attends services at her own church community in Halstenbek on Sundays. "I was warmly welcomed here, right from the start," she says. Ursula Büttner is a historian and researcher of the Shoah, as well as vice-president of the Hamburg-West/Südholstein parish synod. "When sharing a meal after the Shabbat service, I heard that they were collecting donations for the hedge. I noticed that progress was slow," Büttner recalls. She then wrote a letter to the Hamburg provosts and formulated the idea for the gift from the Evangelical church. In her letter, Ursula Büttner called the hedge a sign of reconciliation and peace.

Provost Melzer did not bring an oversize cardboard cheque with him to the Shabbat celebrations. "This evening, the money is still a promise, but it will follow in time," he said. Shortly after his announcement, he joined in with the happy song of the congregation, accompanied by a keyboard and two violins – one played by Hamburg State Rabbi Moshe Navon – and a guitar, played by Pastor Dorothea Pape from the Heilig-Geist-Kirche in Pinneberg. "*Hineh, ma tov*" – "How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" resonates through the room.

For the living and the dead

Pastor Pape's community in Pinneberg was also thanked on the same evening for its donation. She had already offered EUR 1,000 to her Abrahamic brethren in the spring. The money is now used for social work. "We know from our own community how important immediate help is," Dorothea Pape says. She remembers the parish council meeting that featured the donation on the agenda very well. One argument was: If Judaism has already suffered so much, why should this support even be up for discussion?

With its own plot in the cemetery, the way the Reform community sees itself has changed. "These are donations for the living and for the dead," says Hamburg State Rabbi Moshe Navon. "A cemetery is a house of eternal memory." Jewish cemeteries are indeed eternal: the graves may never be removed. This is why they are adorned with stones and not with flowers – flowers wilt but stones are impervious to change. The process resulted in several negotiations with Ohlsdorf cemetery by the community. The dedication of their plot has already been planned for September. For the community, it represents an eternal home in Hamburg. But the question of how future generations will pay for the upkeep of the graves remains unresolved. Until now, many of the dead were interred on the plot held by the Orthodox community.

The lyrics for "*Hineh, ma tov*" appear in a multilingual prayer book. Inside, Hebrew is transliterated into the Latin alphabet, and there are also German and Russian translations of the Hebrew songs. After all, many of the congregation come from countries in the former Soviet Union, coming to Germany as refugees and emigrants.

The LJGH has existed since 1994. It has 300 members, along with another 200 in its Circle of Friends, which comprises those who identify with the community, including Christians and people who are aware of having Jewish roots in their family. The community describes itself as "progressive, modern, open". During the Shabbat celebrations, children kneel on blue gym mats. They are the future of Judaism.



"*Hineh, ma tov*", accompanied by Pastor Dorothea Pape, Daniel Lachmann, Galina Jarkova and Hamburg State Rabbi Moshe Navon. This opens the Kabbalat Shabbat service, which features plenty of songs to welcome the Shabbat. Photo by Catharina Volkert.



Interfaith profile: Prof. Dr. Ursula Büttner, Hamburg State Rabbi Moshe Navon, Provost Karl-Heinrich Melzer, Pastor Dorothea Pape (from right). Photo by Catharina Volkert.