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BQ 472 – No. 11/2017

Commemorations of the 10th anniversary of the Martyrs of Malatya

Turkish Christians face the future with gratitude and trust in God

(Bonn, 22.04.2017) April 18 was the tenth anniversary of the murders of the three Christians Necati Aydın, Tilmann Geske, and Uğur Yüksel in Malatya, eastern Turkey.

The five young murderers had met with their victims for several weeks for a group Bible study at the Zirve Publishing House in Malatya. On April 18, 2007, the victims were tied up and brutally murdered. The perpetrators were immediately arrested by the police, but the trial dragged on for more than nine years, finally coming to a conclusion on September 28, 2016, when the five murderers each received triple lifetime jail sentences. Until that time the criminals had been free, though wearing ankle monitors, as had been the case for several years. After outspoken criticism coming from representatives of the victims, as well as objections from the prosecuting attorney's office, the primary offenders were finally taken into custody on September 30, 2016. (For more info, see the link below.)



The three martyrs of Malatya, from the left: Tilmann Geske, Uğur Yüksel, Necati Aydın © BQ / Titus Vogt

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary, the Christians in Turkey held a central commemorative worship service in Istanbul, on the preceding evening, April 17. And then, on April 18, there were commemorative events in Malatya and Izmir, as there had been in previous years.

The commemorative worship service in Istanbul

"Today we remember one of the most important events of the republic, the murder of our three brothers. We know that the church of Christ is built on the blood of the saints." With these words, Pastor Behnan Konutgan opened the commemorative service in the Armenian Protestant Church in Beyoglu/Istanbul. Indeed, the murder of Coptic Christians in Egypt a week before Easter reminded the congregation of the sober words of Revelation 12:11, "They triumphed over him by the blood of the

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Text & Technology:

Titus Vogt (ViSdP)

Vorderer Kamp 52a, D-25479 Ellerau

Phone: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 06

Fax: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 07

E-Mail: Titus.Vogt@bucer.de



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Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” Clearly Christians must always be ready to die for their faith. Konutgan has long been the pastor of the Emmanuel Bible House Church and President of the Turkish branch of Martin Bucer Seminary. One of the martyrs, Necati Aydin, had begun his theological education at Martin Bucer shortly before the time of his death.



Pastor Behnan Konutgan © BQ / Titus Vogt

Susanne Geske looked back at the ten years since her husband, Tilman, was murdered. The time has passed so quickly, she said, but the pain remains the same. Sometimes she wonders how it would have been if he had been able to see their children grow up. She emphasized her thankfulness that even from the first day, so many Christians have stood by the side of her family, even people who have never met them. She remarked, “We in the East [of Turkey] had never realized how large the family of Christians in Turkey is.” Especially the congregations in Diyarbakir and Ankara helped their family and the small congregation in Malatya. She especially thanked people for praying. Her youngest daughter, Mirjam, once asked her, “Are the people praying for us?” Mrs. Geske answered, “Yes.” Her daughter reacted by saying, “I have noticed it. We are being carried by prayer.”

Geske and her children have repeatedly experienced the power of prayer in the last ten years. She was reminded of a sermon preached by a friend of her husband who had lost his wife in childbirth. This sermon, which was based on the book of Job, reminded the hearers that God was certain that Job would hold fast to God in spite of the most serious suffering. Especially when there were difficulties in everyday life, and when she did not know what to say and do about many questions with her teenagers, she often called out to God: “I can’t do it. You have to take care of my children.” And then there were often concrete answers to prayer, whether through a phone call, a visit



Susanne Geske © BQ / Titus Vogt

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E-Mail: Titus.Vogt@bucer.de

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from friends, or some other way: “We could truly trust God; he carried us through it all.”

In relation to the situation of Christians in Malatya, immediately after the murders, it looked like everything was destroyed. Yet, to quote Mrs. Geske again, “God allowed fruit to grow.”

Pastor Konutgan confirmed that the faithfulness of Susanne Geske and her public witness brought much honor to God.

Susanne’s public words the day after the murders, that she forgave the murderers, were quoted in many newspapers and were seen repeatedly on TV. In this way, according to Konutgan, Mrs. Geske produced “more effects than one hundred missionaries.”

Pastor Hakan Tastan reported on a discussion with Necati Aydin in which Tastan had asked Aydin if he really wanted to go to Malatya, since it could be dangerous. Ultimately, Necati confirmed the words of Philippians 1:23, 24 with his own life. In that text the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

Tastan also reported that the Holy Spirit had been strongly present in a way he had rarely experienced at the conversion of Ugurs to the Christian faith. Just weeks before his brutal murder, Ugur

remarked that he was ready to die for Christ, which proved not to be idle chatter. As the last of the deadly blows were delivered to his body, the last word on his lips was “Mesih,” which means Messiah or Christ.

Semse Aydin, the widow of Necati, who now lives in the USA, sent her greetings with a poem. She continues to experience severe loneliness, but the longer life goes on, the sooner she will be reunited



Commemorative worship service in Istanbul © BQ / Titus Vogt



The Armenian Protestant church in Beyoğlu / Istanbul © BQ / Titus Vogt

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with Necati in eternity with God. His firm trust in Jesus continues to be an inspiration for her.

Refik Topçu, a staff member of Zirve Publishing House, used his speech to characterize the murders in Malatya as a foundational incision into the still young history of Protestant Christians in Turkey. He observes a time before Malatya and a time after Malatya. The massacre left deep footprints, especially in the faith of Christians in Turkey. It also raised deep questions regarding patience with and trust in the Turkish system of justice and freedom. One had to wait through 115 days of hearings over the course of nine and a half years before an initial verdict was rendered. Even the prosecutors, not only the survivors and their churches, gave up hope of a timely and just conclusion. And at the hearing in which the judge finally proclaimed the verdict, he clearly stated that very likely there were other background people involved in the murders, probably including an organization that had supported the murderers, but that, unfortunately, not enough evidence had been discovered.

Nevertheless, according to Topçu, the days of commemoration are a good time to make fresh decisions about where one wants to go. The three brothers were clearly following the command of Jesus in Matthew 28, to confess and communicate their faith: “And with their death they have left us a heritage.” On the morning of April 18, 2007, Topçu happened to read the story of the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, as well as the list of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. When he read those texts then, it had felt as if they were merely lessons in ancient history. But just a few hours later the stories became real; he began arguing with God while going through fear and trembling. And finally he added the names of the three martyred brothers to the end of the story in Hebrews 11 in his Bible.

Even today Christians repeatedly experience pressure. But Topçu did not encourage Christians to try to become heroes. He believes God only desires faith, and God has rewarded the faith of the martyred brothers. Therefore, he said, we should not only mourn but also rejoice. One day we will be united with an uncountable number of believers in white robes to worship before the throne of God. (See Revelation 7.) And then will come the time when God will wipe away every tear. Therefore, we can and should be faithful.

At the end of the worship service, there was a short speech by Rakel Dink, widow of the Armenian journalist, Hrant Dink, who was shot and killed on the street on January 19, 2007. She said the hardest questions after the murder of her husband were those that came from her children. They asked why this happened and said, “Didn’t you trust Jesus?” She said she wanted to answer in such a way that the faith of her children



Rakel Dink, the widow of Hrant Dink
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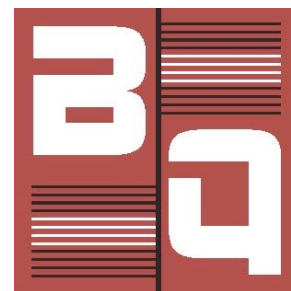
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would be built up, but she also had to be completely honest. So she prayed, and God reminded her of Psalm 103:12: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” And she was also reminded of I Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” And she was able to give these hope-giving texts to her children.

The commemoration in Izmir

More than 100 Christians gathered on April 18 at 2:00 p.m. for a commemoration at the grave of Necati Aydin in the Christian cemetery in Izmir/Karabaglar. Acquaintances of Necati Aydin commemorated his life with short speeches. One speaker mentioned that Jesus promised suffering for the sake of the gospel for serious disciples. Since it was two days after Easter, Christian hope was on everyone’s mind. Someone mentioned that Necati was already experiencing the joy of Christ, and that for Christians, death does not have the final word. By means of worship music, the gathering had the feeling of a joyful and comforting worship service.

Necati Aydin grew up in the city of Menemen, near Izmir. After his conversion to the Christian faith, he was an active member of the Karatas Church in the Konak region of the city of Izmir. Later he moved to the city of Malatya in eastern Turkey.

The commemoration in Malatya

Pastor Tim Stone opened the commemorative worship service of about 80 people with the words of James 5:16: “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” He went on to say that this is what they had experienced in multiple ways in recent years. As a particular example, he mentioned the prayer of a Christian in France who began to pray very specifically for the deaf in Turkey. During the course of years of special prayer, dozens of deaf people in Turkey have come to faith in Jesus Christ, and these



The grave of Necati Aydin © BQ / Wolfgang Häde



Commemorative in the church in Malatya © BQ / Titus Vogt

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new believers live in various cities in Turkey, though the church in Malatya has played a central role in the faith of these new believers. At the time of the commemorations, the church in Malatya was hosting a small conference for deaf Christians in Turkey.

In addition to commemorating the three murdered brothers, the church in Malatya prayed for their country and their country's leadership, for peace and justice, as part of the worship service, while referring to 1 Peter 2:11-17. Pastor Ismail Kulakçioğlu, from Bursa, concluded the service by reminding the gathering of the words of Jesus in John 17:14, that Christians will be hated by the world even as Jesus was hated by the world. But Christians should see other people with the eyes of Jesus and extend the love of God to them.

After the worship service in the church in Malatya, there was a gathering by the grave of Tilman Geske in the Armenian Orthodox cemetery in Malatya. It was marked by prayer and singing, and in spite of great grief, gave great emphasis to the hope of eternal glory in the presence of Jesus.

A somewhat smaller group then drove about 100 km east to the town of Elazig, where Ugur Yüksel was buried. There they also held a commemoration with much prayer and singing.

Christians in Turkey

According to statistics from Silas Ministries, in the last ten years the number of Protestant Christians in Turkey has roughly doubled, from about 3,000 in 2007 to about 6,000 today. In that time, the number of Protestant churches has risen from about 100 to about 150 today. However, in more than 30 of the 81 provinces, there are still no



The grave of Uğur Yüksel © BQ / Titus Vogt



At the Armenian Cemetery in Malatya © BQ / Titus Vogt

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Protestant ministries. In addition to Protestants, there are about 120,000 other Christians in Turkey, of whom the majority belong to the Armenian Orthodox Church. All Christians together in Turkey form about 0.15% of the population.

Downloads and Links:

- Website of the Protestant Church in Malatya: <http://www.malatyakilisesi.com>
- 2016 Human Rights Report of the Association of Protestant Churches (Turkey): https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/BQs/BQ400ff/BQ464/iirf_report_2017_1.pdf
- 2016 report on the situation of the Church in Turkey under persecution and discrimination: <https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-032017-ausgabe-464-eng.html>
- Bonn Profile regarding the preliminary conclusion of the trial, September 2016: <https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-492016-ausgabe-444-eng.html>
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 - [Photo 5](#): Susanne Geske © BQ / Titus Vogt
 - [Photo 6](#): Raket Dink, the widow of Hrant Dink © BQ / Titus Vogt
 - [Photo 7](#): During the commemoration in Izmir © BQ / Wolfgang Häde
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 - [Photo 9](#): The Protestant Church in Malatya © BQ / Titus Vogt
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 - [Photo 14](#): A group of deaf Christians in Turkey © BQ / Titus Vogt
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 - [Photo 17](#): The Geske family © BQ / Titus Vogt
 - [Photo 18](#): The grave of Ugur Yüksel © BQ / Titus Vogt

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