

Overcoming differences - learning from one another: Integrative youth work

Friday evening in the housing estate of a small town. Left and right five storey blocks of flats in between the local bank and a small area of green. The pavements are deserted, you can hear lawnmowers from the few front gardens, in the bus shelter three teenyboppers are sitting - everyday life in Germany. We stroll to the grass, we've brought a ball with us, kick it around a bit. The three from the bus shelter approach us. Anton, we know already, Gerhard too, the third is new. Gerhard's father is an alcoholic, his mother has taken off, he is telling me about his new apprenticeship. Anton speaks with a noticeable accent, a "Russian" (translator's note: one of many national Germans immigrated from Russia), only sees his parents in the evenings, everything is somewhat chaotic; now Sasa is kicking the ball around with him and we get to know the new face. "What's your name? Have you already lived here a long time? Why haven't we ever seen you before?" His name is Rolf, and is a bit unsettled by the sudden questions. Another group turns round the corner. Manfred with his younger brother in tow and other "colleagues". Actually they wanted to loot the chewing gum machine, but now they see us playing, and turn in our direction. "Hey Manfred, everything OK?" The others are disconcerted that we offer them the hand, "stay cool" is more their line. Manfred begins to laugh about the car on Gerhard's T-shirt, the others join in. Sasa reacts: "What do you find so funny about it, if it's important to him; you too've got things which matter for you. What's important for you then Manfred?" "What - matter for what then?" "In general." Their minds begin to tick, it has become very quiet in the group. "It matters to me that I'm healthy," one chimes in, "and friends, friends are also important," interjects another; a conversation begins. In between the ball is kicked around again, until something else is on. Gerhard departs last. "Cheerio Gerhard! - Oh by the way, did you know that tomorrow we are singing with the choir at the Altstadt (Old Town) festival. We're expecting to see you! - And on Monday it's volleyball again, should I fetch you? You can get there yourself? Fine!" - I wonder whether he'll show up.

Trends amongst young people

They spend most of their time with people of their own age, like to withdraw into a private sphere, hardly still have role models. They experience unstable family structures, have few plans for the future, and prefer to spectate: in politics, in clubs or associations, everywhere. They would like "to enjoy life and be independent." Socially oriented activity commitment is certainly possible, but only with the prerequisite that it's fun and remains non-binding. Would really prefer, "to sail as a globetrotter in a boat around the world"; young people formulate their fundamental values in this way.

Responsibility is not of great significance for average, young people in Germany, nor one's own initiative, there are no more big visions. For those below average it is true to state: their family history or their origins abroad, their world of partying or drugs or membership of the right wing or left scene have worsened their life situation, decimated their prospects. Lack of training and unemployment are their greatest worries, followed by substance abuse, anxiety about the future and relationship difficulties. Many are resigned and don't believe that they could change their lives, not to mention the world.

The period of youth is time for learning for a life that makes sense. But who defines sense? The hypothesis that, "everybody is their own happiness maker," has up to now promoted the trend to boundless self-realisation without constraints of relationships. For modern people as a

result answers to questions about the meaning of life have become irrelevant. They put into practice their own blueprint for life and profit thereby from the achievements of the community. Shared values amongst young people have long since disappeared. “The youth” or “the youth trend” doesn’t exist any longer. There are the various scenes, groups, cliques, sub-groups and splitter groups; there are the fashion and car brands, types of sport and directions within music, the discos, residential areas, clubs and meeting-points... according to which young people define their allegiance and their feeling of being alive; the bottom line is that they all remain alone, in ever quicker change, trends and mini-trends chase after each other.

But since everyone – even for those with an ever so individualistic blueprint for life – is dependent on the functioning of social structures, it remains of decisive significance whether the growing generation can be won over for investing energy in social matters, whether their integration into a life together and for each other inside the society functions or not.

Integration – a rewarding investment

Those who understand integration in this way want people to assume responsibility in the face of God and other people. People will be enabled to shape their social surroundings with their energy, time and creativity. They should become aware of their responsibility in the family, community, circles of friends and clubs. In this way the social tendency to egocentric self-realisation may be overcome.

A whole generation took it for granted that such social commitment would necessarily develop in the unfolding of human life. In contrast to this opinion, as the logical result of the anti-authoritarian wave in Germany, ego-addiction asserted itself as the general guideline for activity. Integration, responsibility and the social skills required for them require a directed learning process which is connected with a multiplicity of demands. Volunteer youth workers are challenged to gain the confidence of the young people, to lead the way as role model, and to offer material in their own life worthy of emulation. They have to rely on the existence of areas of learning and experience, in which young people involve themselves with others and are able to learn the moulding of friendship and community.

The amount of personal input required for the aim of fostering integration is large. Christians can draw the necessary motivation from role models in the Bible. They know of the value intense reciprocal relationships, and the commitment to others gives their life meaning.

In the following texts integrative modules of youth work will be described:

Approaching one another ‘Wiehagen in action’

Once a year a large poster appears in front of the green area. Once a year this green space fills with people. There is a lot on offer, games and prayers, wall climbing and mountain-bike rallies, raffles, film and stories at the campfire. Everybody can take part, try something out or simply spectate and be present, forge contacts over sausages and cola. Differences are no problem. Everybody is welcome here: complete families, children, teeny boppers, father, mother, single parents, grannies and granddads, folks from many countries, people from all classes, bankers, business people, manual workers, unemployed, middle-class or addicts, dynamic or without hope, people whom nobody wants. They are all present and belong here. For four days this area of town Wiehagen becomes one big family, and celebrates a party.

Actually it’s not the attractions which attract so many people: it is rather the people who are there everywhere amongst the crowd, inconspicuous, not as the great doers, and yet always

present. They are the many helpers, who mostly have time for a laugh, an ear that hears sighs, a heartening word for the nervous in the queue for sausages. people who take a shy boy by the hand and enthuse him for a game, who drag a yobbo out of a punch-up at the right time, and who still are ready to bend down in the crowd to pick up a sweet paper and take it to the garbage can; members of the staff who don't function as such but who encounter people as a human being, who don't merely perform duties, but rather put themselves on the line, and take it seriously. They miss nothing despite the throng. There is a special atmosphere during these days, an atmosphere of respect for each other.

When a small team of colleagues recognised the crisis in an area of town, at first it was long brooded on together:

Their stock-taking: many tower-blocks, a large number of socially weak families rich in children; myriad foreigners; numerous unemployed; no areas for children to play, no recreational offers at all; a lot of substance abuse and alcohol; a high crime rate – what needed to be done?

The goal: support for children – they should get to know meaningful recreational activities, experience community, learn social skills, obtain orientation in social questions and chances in their future life.

Support for families – The parents find an opportunity for conversations about their questions and experiences. They should be given courage to invest a lot in the future of their children. Through the offer of forgiveness and Christian help with their lives, strife-torn relationships should be healed.

The strategy: as a platform for encounters and confidence-building the Youth Week, “Wiehagen in action” was conceived.

A staff team regularly loaded an old bus (painted with the logo of the Youth Week) with a load of material for play and games. Then they visited young people in that part of town. Discussion groups which otherwise met in a private ambience in order to foster Christian community divided up that neighbourhood. From now on they were to visit fortnightly their “turf” in order to make contacts, to get into conversation, to play with the children, to bring life into the dreary blocks of flats. Now and then they barbecued in the evening at the playground.

The very beginnings of this development were stamped by a lot of organisation and action. Different worlds ran into one another. With what language would people be able to communicate with each other? What did one have to offer one another? But already in their first encounters, the team were taken by the people of that locality into their life stories. It was no longer necessary to put on a show, through conversations about everyday life and about deeper questions in life people came closer together. Soon there were the first invitations into individual's homes, friendships developed. So for many colleagues a personal lifestyle grew out of the voluntary work. The search for living souls, all our endeavours made that clearer, could not be arranged, it had to be lived. The message, “I have room for you and time, you are interesting and important for me,” was received, and responded to with steps taken in our direction.

Open doors

Stefan relates just how important for such youth work families are who open the doors of their flats and private lives:

“After a short and sobering excursion into the world of drugs, I searched further for meaning, friendship and recognition. The world of pubs and meeting-places which had until then been so pivotal for me rapidly dwindled in significance, the superficiality of my “friends” was frustrating. Many ideas busied me, above all political. More and more crucial became the question, where I could find real friends.

The tearoom in Oberdorp had long been known to me. Cautiously I made my way to it there one Sunday. There I met somebody who although he didn't know me, not only quizzed me but also revealed something about himself. That was new to me.

Soon I visited my new acquaintance in the household community in which he lived with many other people of very different histories and origin. One evening, I was on the point of leaving because it was mealtime, a young woman who ran the household asked me would I not like to stay. Surprised I agreed, and simply yet another plate was put onto the large table in the dining room.

I had not reckoned with that: they surely knew that I led a totally irregular life, that I smoked, and then the drugs.... However, I was allowed just to be there, even for a meal, a point in time at which people otherwise usually like to be alone with each other. This evening, considered in retrospect, significantly contributed to being a Christian again becoming attractive to me. Here real friendship was offered to me at every hour of the day without lots of pre-conditions. Some months later I moved into that household, in order to be a friend for others, and to learn for my life. Nowadays my wife and I lead a household community of the Rehabilitation Ministry. To pass on what we have received, is our goal.”

The tearoom

Once a week young people meet in a tearoom at the Rehabilitation Ministry in a former metal band factory. This idea too arose out of the desire to offer people opportunities for contact and joining. It began like many other tearooms at the beginning of the '70s, when in church communities sought for attractive alternatives to the standard youth groups. And it remained when the most tearooms had been closed down.

The variety of people who come together there is one of its remarkable features. The tearoom appears not to have an inhibition level. Grammar schoolites, old punks, manual workers and ravers, teachers and bus drivers, police and drug users, persons from the most varying scenes make contact with each other here as if they had long been friends. Many are that indeed, have got to know and appreciate each other. People who otherwise would absolutely avoid one other, are here in deep conversation together. After all talking is one of the important points on the programme of the tearoom. You are allowed to and should talk about everything here. And everyone can bring in his or her own problems, crises and questions.

This openness is rendered feasible through a particular message which comes across in alternating and personally arranged thematic sections: without phoney reserve the Biblical message is passed on to the effect that everyone has a heart out of which a lot of bad emerges, and that everybody is dependent on the goodness of God, who forgives people. Given this background, the title of a professor and the tattoos of skinheads pale into insignificance. People, who recognise their own need for help, don't have to pretend anything to others. Through that the tearoom becomes a protected area in which the roles, status symbols and functions can for once remain “out there”.

Shaping community

Integration takes place intensively in groups. Effective learning occurs through example and emulation, through experiment and experience in non-compulsory frameworks. Via the personally formed contacts the connection to a larger community can follow. Volunteers over and over again have the experience that it is not the attractiveness of a group programme which determines whether somebody lets themselves be bonded in. Decisive is much more the personal relationship to group leaders and participants. The regular invitation and fetching for events may play a role in that along with visits to the family, sympathetic participation in personal problems.... If someone finds out that they themselves and their participation is important to others, they will take that much more interest in what is happening.

Children's groups

In children's groups the creative design of recreation and the playful practising of social behaviour should stand at the centre – and be fun. There are the special high points: a canoe tour lasting several days or the weekend in a barn. And there are the regular programmes with sport, games and handicrafts. The group offers as well space in which to discuss different themes or school and family problems too. Children from very varying families are present. For example the eleven-year-old Frank. He is fetched by one of the team. Home means for him a lot of noise and beatings. And even if the atmosphere is rotten at home, he still has to be handed over after the group meetings once more at the house door, or he will flee for some hours somewhere else. For boys like Frank the groups represent security.

Music groups

About 100 young people together form the Tearoom Choir. The past of the singers' pasts differentiates this choir from other groups: the majority of these young people were earlier criminal, dependent on drugs, or deep in other life crises. They rehearse once a week, and at the weekends the choir often travels to concerts in prisons, churches or is on its way somewhere else. "Hold on" is the title of their most recent CD release, which was put together out of live recordings from two concerts in the prison in Wuppertal.

The choir is often on the move abroad too. It has already travelled through Brazil, Kenya, Uganda, India, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Switzerland, England, the Netherlands, France and Austria. The young folk, amongst them various nationalities learn for such journeys songs in the respective language of the country, and perform a lot in churches and prisons. With their programmes they would like to emphasise the love of God which has transformed their lives and given impulses for the development of a social welfare mission for those liable to punishment.

Sports groups

Sports teams offer the chance to develop team spirit. The sport helps one to learn how to cope with aggression, and promotes the ability to adapt into a group as well as the maturing of fair ways of behaving. Through the communication of sporting know-how the connection with one's own body is brought about, and in competitive sport motivation to achieve and endurance are awakened.

The Rehabilitation Ministry offers the chance to play football, volleyball and table tennis. In the groups not only the trainer is of great significance but also the person looking after the team. Because here – as in other of the association's groups – extremely different young

people are harnessed together. Those persons who through physical limitations or through their behaviour would not have a chance in another club, should too be supported. In training people work on their physical condition, and game techniques are practised. The Rehabilitation Ministry is a member in a sports department of the *Land* North Rhine-Westphalia (the West German volleyball association) as well as in the city sports association. In competitions and tournaments the teams are very often victorious.

Discussion circles

Small groups which meet regularly in the houses of participants promote cohesion in a distinct way, and deepen existing relationships. They can develop for the participants into long-term points of reference and friendship circles. With the help of Biblical texts or thematic suggestions, personal questions are thought about. Birthdays and other personal occasions are celebrated. The regular exchanges concerning families, jobs, everyday life and other themes protect the participants from isolation and unrealistic ways of behaviour.

Learning group work

Those who through interventions by other people go through a transformation of their own lives and find friends, gain in understanding for the situations of other people who are “outsiders”. As a result they have the possibility of being given responsibility for others. They can learn to intervene in many spheres so life, above all the social. The last step of the process of integration leads to them becoming involved in the work.

In every group there are opportunities to lend a hand, and to work for the benefit of others. The trainees have to be able to experience: what I am doing now, is seen by others and needed. And they have to be able to make mistakes. A shelter is required, in which they encounter real challenges but do not carry the final responsibility. At the side of the more experienced the young colleague can first of all observe, then take over partial duties, and finally bear responsibility independently.

With that the circle closes. Integrative youth work has a multiplacatory effect. Within its surroundings a social climate grows which the growing generation urgently needs. Young people who open their lives for others, can also assert influence in public life and help to mould social developments.