

## **The world which we shape together; basic principles of the work of the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry**

What characterises the work of the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry Scheideweg today did not originally come about through studying the literature, the comparison of existing plans, or exhaustive strategic planning. It began - as in many similar projects - by way of concrete encounters with people in crisis situations. In one case the padre of a youth prison invited the evangelical youth groups to celebrate a service behind bars. Those who come once and then over and over again find relationships to the youthful inmates, and know themselves to be challenged by the example of Jesus Christ. "Let us love because he loved us first." (1. Epistle to John 4,19); these Biblical words contain the leitmotif which dares us to practical deeds.

### **Impulses out of the New Testament**

Voluntary actions resulting from a Christian motivation realises that it is obligated to the exemplary activity of their name giver. Jesus Christ himself went to the outcasts, the physically disabled, the sick, the obsessed, the unfaithful, self-prostituting and criminal. He developed relationships and friendships in the private sphere with members of marginalized groups. His critics dubbed him contemptuously a "Friend of tax collectors and sinners". The NT verifies that he not only gave his attention to those who had been excluded from the established society – he even identified himself with them. Thus he stated in one of his last speeches: "I was in prison, and you came to me," and: "What you did to the smallest of my brothers, you also did that to me." (Matthew 25, 36 and 40).

From his perspective on the "weak" in society, his dealings with marginalized groups lets us derive important stimuli for action in the framework of the rehabilitation work, which give it a special character. So the idea of living with each other already stamped the first community in Jerusalem: Christians cultivated a community for living and the everyday which went far beyond the context of their religious services; with the deployment of their personal and financial possibilities, they looked after the needy in their ranks. Through the employment of (voluntary) welfare mission workers care of the poor was early on assigned a department. Help for people in material distress was organised in a nationwide way. It was precisely the socially needy who found new spaces to live in the early Christian communities. The over-representation of "outsiders" became a hallmark of the later Christian communities too. The commitment of the first Christians took place at the heart of their houses, their families and their community meetings. It was first of all not helping people in crises but rather relationships based on friendship that were built up. Right up until today, care of one's neighbours which developed out of the Christian faith has remained an important trait in an increasingly secular society.

At the same time the Christian orientation is for many an important motivation for a permanent departure from the worlds of criminality or addiction. Very important in this respect is that those individuals once again find a place inside the society. The involvement of the Rehabilitation Ministry accepts this challenge.

### **Integration**

The quality of life in a society does not automatically increase with the amount of consumer goods. Modern, affluent societies have paid for their progress with a decrease in inter-

personal relationships, and therefore in quality of life. The involvement of the Rehabilitation Ministry counteracts this trend, in that inter-human relationships are foregrounded.

Rapid social processes of upheaval (such as that demonstrated in the reunification of Germany), the increasing demands made in the sphere of work, ever more individualisation, and the decreasing significance of traditional and social institutions (family, association, church) characterise our situation. The new freedom (or insecurity?) opens chances both for advancement in society and for a fall.

Somebody released from jail needs to be integrated (in the society) rather than resocialised (e.g. in therapeutic institutions). Therefore in the household communities of the Rehabilitation Ministry, there is no opposition of carers and cared-for, no therapeutic treatment and no set length of stay (i.e. through confirmation of payment for temporary periods of residence). Everybody decides through his or her behaviour whether they carry the weight of responsibility or whether they have to be carried.

The staff of the Rehabilitation Ministry accepts people who have been released from jail or delinquents into their families. Or a single young person may move into such a familial household community and share a room with them. They spend their free time together, become friends. And already before the release from jail, relationships are built up with the help of regular visits and conversations in the penal institutions.

### **Inclusion of the private domain**

That people share their own domiciles and their time with other people, become friends, is an especial characteristic of the work of the Rehabilitation Ministry. The intensive living together in personally shaped relationships oversteps the normal extent of “voluntary commitment”, it becomes part of one’s own lifestyle. Assistance takes place in reciprocal form and the sustaining foundation of that is family life and a wide circle of friends which has developed around the household communities and the work of the rehab. All the participants profit from the sharing of existences and the spending of recreational time together. No one should merely go along with it and be provided for. Everybody is challenged also for their part to bring something into the community. Confidence grows where people get to know each other better, where the newly discovered orientation to life has to prove its worth in everyday situations.

### **Of one’s own free will**

Relationships which are the product of personal moulding presuppose willingness on all sides. In the contact groups in prison every participant decides themselves how long they wish to take part and with whom they speak. In the sphere of youth work, groups with differing degrees of required involvement are on offer, and likewise the life in a familial household community takes an individual’s own freely made decision as read. “You are voluntarily here, and I am voluntarily here”; this thought plays a large role in the solution of interpersonal conflicts, or in the question of readiness to go through changes.

Willingness that signifies too: relationships are not determined by orders from outside by way of financial dependency or work contracts. In the household communities, every person can remain for as long as they think necessary. There is no “period of residence” determined by the subsidising agency.

### **Financial independence**

A great opportunity presented by voluntary work is that it can take place without financial support by the state. Publicly financed programmes are often very rigid concerning the groups targeted, in the methods employed and the estimated time. Furthermore their main emphasis is set on problems which at the time are in the foreground of public interest. Through the intensive inclusion of voluntary involvement, it is more easily possible for the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry Scheideweg to turn their attention to current problems, or to go down new paths without any bureaucratic decision-making processes.

“In their simplicity, as the natural scion of the welfare society, voluntary activity is exposed to a threatening infiltration by bureaucracy, commerce and monopolistic professionalism. ... Already far too many associations are dependent on subsidies, and would rather wait in a state of lasting uncertainty for the kick of the notification of approval of a grant rather than orienting themselves to an independent and dynamic concept. With that they themselves fall back again into bureaucracy, and adapt themselves again to the altered criteria for subsidies.” (Kinds, Henk: Neue „Freiwilligkeit“ in Europa. Freiwilliges und ehrenamtliches Engagement in den Niederlanden [New “voluntariness” in Europe. Unpaid and voluntary involvement in the Netherlands], in: Jugendpolitik, Nr. 2, Oktober 1995, S. 32f)

### **Internationalism**

Through the independence of rehabilitation work from statutory financing, this model becomes interesting in an international context. In the states of the former Soviet Union and in many African and Asian countries, no welfare system comparable to that in Germany will be able to develop due to the condition of state budgets. Nevertheless it is possible that citizens involve themselves with their endangered fellow-citizens – and for that make use of their own private opportunities.

Especially in aid for people liable to punishment, it appears to be time for a process of internationalising: criminality has for a long time now been a problem that goes beyond national borders. Those who in Germany deport foreigners liable to punishment back to their own countries without any future prospects should not be very surprised to meet the very same people soon again in Germany. Through their international contacts the Rehabilitation Ministry is able e.g. to prepare the return to Eastern Europe or Asia of foreigners imprisoned in Germany, and to organise for the deportees some brighter horizons in their native countries. The voluntary workers to some extent bring their knowledge of other languages with them into the contact groups, and as a result can speak with the prisoners who otherwise inside the penal institutions hardly find conversational partners.

### **The people affected become colleagues**

In the years that have gone past, many young people who were formerly delinquents, or addicts, themselves became sustaining voluntary workers. Through their work they wanted to pass on what they themselves had been given as a gift by God or people. So they open their families to endangered people, involve themselves in the work of the contact group, or help in practical spheres of work. They are “experts” in conversations about criminality or addiction, and really know what they are talking about. And they can point to a path which they themselves went down out of the scene. They are not theoreticians.

### **Many-sided involvement**

Different people bring different skills into the rehabilitation ministry. Practical talents are needed, for instance, in the sphere of work instruction or for renovating properties; language talents in travel or in the encounters with foreigners in prison; organisational abilities in the work of committees; educational skill in youth work.

Important is the opportunity for definite participation and the experience that their own contribution is concrete and clear, and achieves something for other people.

### **Voluntary work as scope for experience**

For those who have committed themselves in the rehabilitation ministry, new experiences are opened to them. Getting to know social realities which had hitherto been unknown to them, encounters with other cultures, new events which go beyond generational divides, and the view beyond their own social grouping are all made possible in this work. As well as that comes the know-how in getting on with other people, and the possibility to deploy and try out different skills. And last but not least, many opportunities are offered to put their Christian belief into practice.

### **Sharing life with each other: life in the household communities**

When the work of the Scheidewegers in the Siegburg approved school began, the staff found out very soon: people who talk in prison of the love of God, have to help in practical ways too. Logically consistent aid in prison requires that the relationships which have been formed there are continued after the day of release from the institution. The Scheidewegers provided flats and jobs for the released, and they learned from experience: the availability of work and flats is indeed important for those released from jail, but is, however, by a long way insufficient for many young people. Crises are recognised too late due to an excessive spatial and personal distance, and lead to relapses.

The staff of the contact groups in prison decided as a result to accept delinquent young people into their own families, and to integrate them completely into the existing family network. Already in the first year of work 30 former "Siegburgers" lived with the families of staff. The Christians engaged in prison work collected first experiences in living together, got to know and understand people from other backgrounds better, and developed the idea of a familial household community.

After the purchase of suitable properties failed a number of times as a result of sizeable protests by local residents, the association purchased its first house in Hückeswagen-Scheideweg. The house-parents moved in their with their daughter. That was followed not only by young committed Christians without a criminal history but also young delinquents, and jointly they formed a "large family". As in every other family they lived together 24 hours a day, and shared recreation and private life in common.

Up until today nothing has changed in this system. As a rule, in the household community two people with contrasting biographies split a room. Conflicts which arise are taken seriously and have to be resolved. In pastoral conversations, situation-related connections to their life histories are worked through. The association offers as a complement to familial life, work training and the youth work programme i.e. a completely new environment free of criminality. New friends and growth into the processes of work constitute key steps on the way to a new lifestyle. Some other problems can be overcome in these first months; there may

be judicial procedures to overcome, medical treatments to be undergone, and debts regulated. On average young people live some three years in a family.

A report: “We would very much like to introduce ourselves; different as we are undoubtedly are, we do indeed belong together. Who are we? A household community, a large family with many large and small children. What connects us? The wish to help people, to learn to live once again. The urge to climb out of drug addiction, to break away from criminality. the wish, to put in order again the chaos in one’s own head, heart and life – simply to find an idea for one’s life. The desire to demonstrate the opportunities of life with God which enable us to experience forgiveness, and offer both our neighbours and us the opportunity of personal change.

How we live? What follows is a glimpse of our family: our day commences at cock-crow, very early indeed the alarm clocks ring because at 6 a.m. breakfast is served. Everybody creeps somewhat sleepily out of their room. Michael hardly manages to mutter, “Good morning!” Sven does a second round, and wakes the others so that they too after a short struggle leave their snug beds. At the breakfast table people are concerned first of all only with the necessities, the coffee, the bread and the marmalade. Gradually current news about football is exchanged, work discussed. People have to sort out how Philipp will reach his place of work. Edmundo phoned to say that he would be late, and Sylvia needs the car to drive to do the shopping. Now it is becoming bustling at the table.

But we quieten down one more time, read an excerpt from a devotional book, pray and get under way. After breakfast we still have time to read the Bible together in our rooms, to reflect on the text and to tank up innerly for the day. Then at 7.45 a.m. we leave for work. Some of us work in firms outside, do apprenticeships or are being trained; others are still students or attend school. For us a meeting in the Plant Park at Scheideweg, one of our special purpose businesses. After the division into teams and prayer together, work begins.

The building teams travel to a building site at Remscheid and Wermelskirchen, the tree school team will root out weeds and carry out new plantings, the Plant Park has already opened and the first customers arrive. Today is supposed to be a very hot day, that means don’t forget the watering. In our metalwork company there is a great deal happening, and the work has to be performed very exactly so the customers will be satisfied with the machine plant. After the lunch break, the afternoon passes quickly. At 6 p.m. there is the evening meal and from many different directions we stream into the house. First of all through the kitchen. “What’s there to eat?” “How was your day?” – “Stress in the firm.” – “Can’t be bothered – but we’ll just go on.” Sylvia our housemother gets the dinner ready and after having a shower, the boys show up for their evening meal. Everyone has gone through something, and chips in, our four small children, aged two to seven, also look forward to their larger friends. The smaller Philipp still wants to play football with the not so small Philipp, the little girls still want to ride their bikes, and daddy has to repair the bike chain once again. Unfortunately daddy got home too late from the building site so it is a good thing that Andreas, our person doing community service (as an alternative to the army), can repair the bike, and for the kids the evening is saved. The “big boys” belong here, as far as our children are concerned, they are sad when one leaves, and they have gathered from a very early age how very much drugs and criminality destroy people’s lives.

This evening we would like to go swimming. We have a dynamic programme and are not tired so quickly. But Alex appears to be exhausted. He hasn’t been long with us, what is he thinking about at the moment? The pull of drugs is enormous. After swimming we still have

time to play a round of table football, some sit in the living room and chat. Maurice is here for one weekend, he is spending his break from prison with us. He doesn't know much about the life in a household community. He is cautious but at the same time interested. It would be great if we could win him as a friend, and show him how rewarding a life with God can turn out to be. Thomas, our housefather, explains some things to him, and so the conversation flows back and forth. At 11.40 p.m. everyone says goodnight in turn, sandwiches are prepared for the next morning, the table is covered for tomorrow's breakfast, then we turn in for the night. And tomorrow a day awaits us again with new challenges."

Life in a household community contains community, commitments and responsible cooperation. The staff face a challenge of acting as a new role model everyday – also taking into account their own strengths and weaknesses. One quickly reaches one's own personal limits. Important supports for us are the internal bonding within a community, the open conversations with each other, and prayer. Over and over again to seek for an idea for people, to understand their crises and not to be disappointed by their failure is part and parcel of everyday life. Here a life based on forgiveness is a practical reality. And forgiveness becomes a mutual challenge because just like in a family we know each other well, and everyone notices the weaknesses and errors of the others.

Therefore in this life shared with each other, friendship presents a great challenge: the majority have come from a world of insecurity, always rushed and stamped by deep mistrust. Relationships are cultivated in order to obtain some advantage from them, become meaningful in order that one does not oneself fall by the wayside. To be loyal to another person, to give them something from one's own life, and to open oneself, this experience is a novelty for many. In this respect it would be valuable to be able to communicate frankly with somebody: because after the first days when the withdrawal has been overcome, or the euphoria about the successful exit from the scene has worn off, disillusionment sets in. Where will one's life go? Without work, without training, perhaps already with a child, with a mountain of debts which cannot be regulated? Now what counts is to hold out, and to face up to one's past. There is paperwork and visits to the authorities to be made, and courts or creditors to be called on.

In the household communities, the encounter with human beings who were themselves liable to punishment or dependent on drugs gives people courage. The former can show a path out of the old life, which they themselves have chosen, can give practical help and talk credibly about their relationship with God.

Those who leave the household communities after perhaps three or four years, move out of their family like a child who has grown up: the relationships remain intact, people see each other regularly and remain bonded with each other.

The idea of an open family has spread in recent years. After they move out many from the household communities settle not far from their place of work. They found their own families and in turn accept young people; like a small avalanche, which once set in motion, becomes ever larger, and thereby continue the work. Here on the spot, but in other countries too. We stay on the ball, and want to give others a push to open their lives for people seeking help.