

An unusual invitation: the beginnings of the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry

The work of the Christian Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry (Gefährdetenhilfe Scheideweg) originated at "Scheideweg", a suburb of Hückeswagen in the Oberbergischen administrative district which lies between the cities of Cologne and Wuppertal. This village gave the "Gefährdetenhilfe Scheideweg e. V." (Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry) its name. As an authentic eye-witness of this development, Friedel Pfeiffer reports in the following about the formation and the growth over 20 years of this registered association.

"In the course of the '68 movement public interest in Germany was directed at social conflict centres, and through that at penal institutions. A general awareness arose that those liable to punishment needed help to overcome their problems. In common with my friends I had first of all taken up Maoist thinking at this time. Disappointed by the current events in China, I turned together with my wife to social progress. Our personal conversions to Jesus Christ changed our thinking and life plans. We began to pray for God to show us a task.

Initiation of the contact group work in penal institutions.

During my work as a sports group leader in a local protestant youth group, an inquiry came our way from the youth custody centre in Siegburg. There the governor and the chaplain for the prison displayed a lot of courage and initiative: the institution which at that time had over 1, 000 inmates opened its doors wide for voluntary work from citizens. On the 12th of March 1972 as young Christians from Hückeswagen, we visited some young prisoners. One of our first impressions was that this should not remain a one-off encounter.

I personally knew about the youth custody centre already from another perspective. At the regional court in Wuppertal I was working as a lay judge (in criminal cases too), and so had taken part in the convicting of young people to prison sentences. From that I had learned of the helplessness in the search for alternatives to prison.

In the prison at Siegburg and elsewhere supported programmes for prisoners came about from different social groups. They soon were termed 'contact groups'. A short time after their birth, contact group work became a natural component of prison life. Visitor groups strong in terms of numbers entered the prisons within this context, and legal regulation of this work became necessary. Upper levels of the judicial authorities approached the prison governors with the request that they report on the work of the voluntary workers. The Ministry of Justice in the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia recognised the formation which had already taken place of these social initiatives and their style of working in the prisons. Crucial forces in the state parliament and within the judicial system were open to them and approving.

The Minister of Justice at that time Dieter Posser commissioned the senior civil servant Erich Czascke with the task of drawing up the first draft to a general state-wide regulation of voluntary work. On the basis of this draft, on the 1st of August 1976 a general Order of the North-Rhine Westphalian Minister of Justice came into effect. Contact group work was given a legal status in this way. Nevertheless the representatives of the contact groups could not assent to some of the provisions of the Order. Above all we disagreed with a minimum age of 21 years for contact group workers and the forbidding of admission for volunteers who within the last five years had themselves been inmates. It was our belief that also younger people

would mature into good colleagues, and that they could be a good counterpart for people of their age. Likewise precisely those who themselves had been behind bars and who had broken with their former life could communicate hope to the prisoners and spur them on to a change of mind.

On the 22nd and 23rd of June 1977 an extensive hearing took place at the Parliament of North-Rhine Westphalia. Prison governors, representatives of the Ministry of Justice, and representatives of the contact groups, among them myself, presented to the parliamentarians the idea of the contact group work, and detailed their criticisms of the ministry's regulations as well as proposals for changes. This led to the issuance of a revised order by the Minister of Justice which has still been until this day the basis of this work. It contains among other elements the following provisions which are important for us, and which we struggled for:

The minimum age for contact group work is 21. However, in the youth custody centres the governors can also grant permission to younger volunteers. Former inmates can also take part in the contact groups provided that their last spell of imprisonment was at least over two years ago, and they are no longer on probation or supervision of conduct.

Volunteers only have to report to the penal administration from their conversations in the contact groups when it is concerning an offence against Section 138 StGB (Penal Code) which refers to the planning of crimes, or would mean a significant endangering of the security and order within the institution. This provision guarantees for the most part the confidential nature of the conversations.

In our contact groups nowadays, amongst others taking part are blue and white-collar employees, housewives, students, employers and pensioners. They are recruited by other contact group workers, through religious services, press statements, radio and TV reporting or various information meetings. With 19 contact groups we are present in 15 different penal institutions, and so reach out to men and women, youth and adults, those awaiting trial and convicted inmates.

Structure and Financing of the Association

In this involvement we perceive ourselves as an initiative and not as an institution. We want to keep the 'organisational super-structure' and the administrative domain as minimal as possible. Through the increasing volume of work, however, basic legal and organisational structures have become unavoidable. In January 1975 the 'Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry' was inscribed in the local index of registered associations of the district court of the area. The association obtained its recognition as an agency for youth welfare services (Section 75 of the Social Law Code – eighth book), and chose the Diakonische Werk (Social Welfare Division) of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland as its leading association.

Along with the leading association, the Landschaftsverband Rheinland (Rhineland Association) as regional agency of social work, the authorities of the administrative district and the town have been close partners in cooperation since the beginning of this work. The concerned commitment of the Mayoress of Hückeswagen and other local politicians have contributed significantly to the development of the work.

We deliberately do without governmental financing – for instance, from standard rates as stated in Section 72 BSHG (Federal Social Security Act) . We want to work beyond narrowly defined guidelines for grants. This enables us to go down new routes, and to adjust ourselves to the individual crises of the people whom we look after. The Federal Ministry for Young

People has as a result designated us as a model project in the domain of ‘social involvement’ in the Federal Plan for Youth. The North-Rhine Westphalian Ministry of Employment described us as an ‘exemplary political project in the employment market’. The work is financed overwhelmingly by donations, and profits from our own work. On top of that come administrative fines directed to us and individual public subsidies for concrete projects. Nowadays our association has 450 members.

Accommodation of delinquent young people

Single-minded and consistent Christian involvement in prisons requires that the relationships, which come into being there, can be continued after the period of release from jail. As a result soon the first young people moved into flats which we had rented in our area and fitted-out? We also found work – in conjunction with the local job centres (Arbeitsamt) for them. In their free time we fetched them into our group or families. In that however, we experienced a spatial and personal distance which was too large. Crises were not at once recognised and seen too, and led to relapses. So members of contact groups decided to accommodate delinquent young people in their own families, and to integrate them fully into their familiar network.

Into our own family we admitted a young man whose criminality was closely related to his homosexuality. We had at that time two young sons. With complete confidence that God held our family in his hand, this step was nevertheless possible. Many delinquent young people have lived since then with our family. These encounters were helpful for our children in the context of planning their own lives. They have become meanwhile adult, and are involved themselves in the Christian work with those liable to punishment.

In 1978 the association purchased a house which was supposed to offer places to young people after release from prison. The purchase was accompanied by massive protests from citizens with the motto: “We don’t want in our area people just released from jail!” This climate of rejection in our neighbourhood later turned into friendship and interest when expected nuisance noise and theft didn’t happen.

The house father – himself earlier liable to punishment – moved into the house in 1979 with his wife, daughter and other young Christians who did not bring with them previous criminal experience. The delinquents who were accommodated became members of a “large family”. Our household communities have retained up to this day the character of a very personally designed community of young people of different moulds with house parents being the centre.

Further household communities in rented or purchased houses followed in the succeeding years:

In February 1981 we took the opportunity of renting in a neighbouring village, Straßweg, a house for a second household community. ‘Haus Straßweg’ is situated only two kilometres from Scheideweg. In that house there are ten rooms to live in as well as a cellar which is used for hobbies and table tennis.

A complex of former factory buildings on the outskirts of the neighbouring town Wermelskirchen was bought by the association in December 1984. There we established among other things a household community for young women who had been in crisis situations. Dependent on drugs, psychologically unstable, liable to suicide, single pregnant girls or those who have been released from institutions for the young are resident there.

In 1986 a building which had been a bakery became our 4th household community. A couple who worked with us placed this building at our disposal.

In 1989 the former President of the Bundestag (German parliament) Professor Dr. Rita Süßmuth laid the foundation stone in Hückeswagen-Scheideweg of the project 'Hoffnung für viele' (Hope for the many) which brought into being the idea of a connection between working and living. On the c. 14, 000 square meter site of the project, arose the customer-oriented special purpose business 'Pflanzenpark Scheideweg' (Plant Park Scheideweg), the storerooms for materials and machines for our garden and landscape businesses and two household communities. The building was erected together with delinquent young people, for the most part through their own contribution.

In 1997 the association purchased and enlarged a former textile company in Scheideweg, and out of it created the 'Begegnungszentrum Scheideweg' (Encounter Centre Scheideweg) with rooms for group work and for large events. The work took a further, important step forward in the summer of 2000 with the opening of the Gewerbehalle (Trading Hall) in Oberdorp on the new business estate which was recently set up and adjoins our village. In the Gewerbehalle Oberdorp the company GFH Scheideweg Metallbau gem. GmbH (GFH Scheideweg metalwork private [limited] company with charitable status) found a home. This firm was at first provisionally based in the grounds of 'Hoffnung für viele' (Hope for many). Here delinquent young people are trained in the occupations of cutting operative and parts finisher, parts for the automobile and castor industries are processed, and moreover in the high-grade steel domain large water plants of the highest quality (reverse osmosis and distillation plants) are built for the pharmaceuticals industry.

Along with the household communities, nowadays the families of employees accommodate individuals who have been released from jail. Typically spouses in these families have often experienced such help themselves, when they – years ago – exited from the crime milieu or drug scene.

Integration in work and recreational areas

Integrating our young people straight away in an area of work outside fails due to their vulnerability to criminality or addiction, or their lack of motivation to achieve, or their inability to master an eight-hour day. Further difficulties were their behaviour towards their superiors or their colleagues or lack of practical abilities. Preparatory work training was unavoidable. For that one of our colleagues who had until then been involved on a voluntary basis, gave up his job and from then on as a full-time employee instructed a group of young people during the day in different activities. The 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft' (working community) in short known as ARGE came into being and endeavours to acquire commissions in niches of competition: transport, smaller jobs in the field of painting and mason work, basic forestry work, lawn mowing etc.

Since the quality of work is best measured by its acceptance from the customer, we deliberately built up customer-oriented companies - especially the 'Pflanzenpark Scheideweg' (plant park Scheideweg).

A metal workshop was also created which reflected the major, business significance of metal processing in our region. Our young people could complete a training to become parts finisher or cutting operatives or gain a certificate as a welder.

In cooperation with the job centres, after a work training phase of three to twelve months, other young delinquents are placed on either a training or employee basis in nearby

companies. On the basis of the poor micro-economic employment situation, in recent years we have added a further aid to occupational integration. Some of the young people whom we look after obtain in connection with the work training another contract for a position in one of our special purpose businesses, these temporary contracts for work and care run for one or two years and social insurance for them is compulsory. Their chances of being found a place in the employment market are significantly improved through this temporary period of occupation with obligatory social insurance. The areas of work mentioned here include the garden and landscape companies which work to full capacity as well as a carpentry workshop.

The relationships with the local population have been noticeably deepened through these companies. Local citizens become our customers, experience friendly service and the high quality of what is on offer, often get into conversation with our young folk, and so can reduce their own prejudices against people liable to punishments.

The recreational groups have a similar impact: for the most part it is young people from the immediate or surrounding area who participate in the open programmes, the youth choir, the sports groups, the youth travel or other offers. Delinquent and non-delinquent young people develop relationships there with each other and overcome barriers. These groups are organised with the aim of integrating delinquent people. In our sports associations e.g. along with the trainer the role of the person who looks after them assumes great significance, and they carry responsibility for the social interests of their group.

In youth work we have paid attention to linking open and group work with young people. The main emphasis in the open youth work is our tearoom. On Sunday evenings about 200 young people meet here. Many of them seek conversation and help due to their addiction, criminality or isolation. With the help of training, the voluntary tea room employees are prepared for the conversations with people in life crises.

Our conversation groups offer a special opportunity: some eight young people with different life backgrounds meet fortnightly in about ten different groups for personal conversation. Experiences and problems are swapped, they read the bible together and pray.

It is important for us that young people can bring their various talents with them into these programmes. Musical and other creative programmes alternate with sporting, conversational and experience-oriented ones. Youth work creates at the same time scope for experience and promotes international understanding. Young people from very differing cultures take parts in the programmes. Our young people's choir regularly travels in different European and non-European countries. We seek encounters e.g. in Italy, Hungary, Switzerland and Poland. The choir arranges concerts in African prisons, in Indian slums or South American substance abuse agencies.

These activities and travels creates prospects for the future: those who want to participate have to bear the cost of the journeys themselves. For many their professional work is a strong motivation. The experience from other continents furthermore helps people to relativise their own problems, and to recognise and make use of their own opportunities and perspectives. Young people who came partly out of penal institutions or the drug milieu, whom we looked after, later went abroad as mission helpers to Africa, Asia or South America.

The effect of multipliers

Our work in Hückeswagen had the effect of an initial ignition for the formation of over 30 partner organisations in Germany and abroad or influenced their development significantly. We are closely connected with each other, the groups however develop for the most part as

independent associations as appropriate for the varying local conditions. Through an "International contact meeting of Christian Rehabilitation Ministries" which takes place annually as well as through conferences on questions of the practice of welfare missionary work, we promote the development of existing associations and the foundations of new ones. Through training of staff, visiting each other, and the sending of our colleagues, we have moreover forged links with Kenya, India, Brazil, the Asian part of Russia and Mongolia.

For the domain of further education we have set up two training centres, 'Haus Kreckersweg' in North Rhine-Westphalia, and 'Schloß Wendorf' in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Judges, governors of penal institutions, doctors, politicians, probation officers, the staff of the Crossroads Prison and Rehabilitation Ministry Scheideweg and other speakers design programmes which take place throughout the year. Guests from throughout Germany and abroad take part in them.

We have a special relationship with Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. There during the days of the former German Democratic Republic, the ZDF (translator's note: West German national TV channel) TV reportage 'Knacki - das war ich mal', (Jailbird - I was one once') was broadcast. Through that already before die Wende (the fall of communist governments in 1989) intense, mutual contacts arose in that region. We responded with different seminar programmes to the apparent need for training in the field of helping those liable to punishment. We stimulated the growth of contact groups in the prisons of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Nowadays we direct five contact groups there.

In 1992 we commenced the renovation of the ruined manor house 'Schloß Wendorf' (Wendorf castle) in the administrative district Waren/Müritz. The local authorities let us have this building and a 4.5 hectare castle park for the symbolic sum of DM 1,-. Together with young delinquents, we set up household communities in this castle, rooms for open youth work, and the training centre. For the most part lacking in this rural area are programmes in the sphere of youth work. We direct our activities there at the prevention of both addiction and delinquency.

Everyday we receive many requests for admittance from desperate youngsters or members of their family. We are concerned that we are only able to offer a small number of them help. So we want to work with multipliers, and seize each opportunity to pass on ideas and information. In addition we deliberately search out for exchanges of opinions with interested citizens or social forces who could be important for helping delinquents.