

Hard Edged



**Lessons From Radical
Christian Youth Work**

Flashback

Working with neo-Nazi teenagers in Germany not long after the East-West Wall came down was a sobering experience.

With the rise of the far-right and other extremist groups today in the UK and beyond, there are stark lessons we can and should learn – and quickly. Seeing young people dressed in full-length black leather coats and boots, strutting arrogantly, shouting racist slogans and making blatant Nazi salutes made my blood run cold.

I had to shake myself to snap WW2 TV images of Nuremberg rallies out of my mind, to remind myself I was there to bring Jesus, to show his love.

Influence

The goal of this Christian CVJM (YMCA in Germany) project was to influence the beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours of these young people who identified and aligned themselves with the far-Right, particularly in relation to other young people who had migrated into Germany with their families.

We did this by spending time and building personal relationships with them, hearing and responding to their issues, concerns and frustrations as well as we could. The tricky part was to avoid being misunderstood and misrepresented by the migrants and other local people, as if we were colluding with the very young people whose outlook and actions we were hoping to change.

Unemployment in the region was running high, as were inter-community tensions. A national far-Right party was planning to hold a political rally in the town and Christians were struggling to know how to take a strong public stance against it whilst, at the same time, to exert authentic, positive relational influence.

Backdrop

I had worked previously in detached youth work with street gangs in the UK, particularly at night, with bored groups of teenagers who were self-confessedly creating trouble on council housing estates and harassing local residents. This helped prepare me for what I was now facing in Germany,

I now spent two to four weeks in Germany each year to support and learn from a radical Christian social worker there. I spoke basic German and the youths were cautiously intrigued by this strange foreigner. The new dimension for me was working with groups that united around an explicit social-political belief system and identified with other groups that shared those same beliefs. Over time, 3 key observations emerged:

Belonging

The first thing that struck me was how many of the people in this neo-Nazi youth group came from backgrounds characterised by unhappy and dysfunctional relationships. Against this backdrop, the group functioned as a substitute family: a relational unit that fulfilled a deep social-psychological need to belong. For young people who feel lost, alone and isolated in the world, the emotional security such groups can provide is a powerful motivating factor to join and stay.

Sense-making

The second thing that struck me was the simplistic nature of the far-Right ideology. Most of the young people in the group had struggled in the formal education system. They felt insecure, perplexed and confused by the complex world, situations and relationships in which they found themselves. They yearned for simplicity – for something or someone that would bring clarity. The ideology that they chose fulfilled an intense longing to make sense of their world and their lives.

Making a difference

The third thing that struck me was the group's overt sense of mission. Its belief system provided its members with a compelling vision, a galvanising purpose, a shared endeavour in their lives and a deep sense that they could influence and do something important in the world. In a socio-political context where so many young people felt marginalised and disenfranchised, it fulfilled a deep need to believe they could make a difference, take back control, feel less out-of-control and find hope.

Lessons

I'm aware that what I'm presenting here is a tidy distillation of my own reflections on this experience and that real-life isn't that simple. It's tempting to ask, 'What on earth are these young people thinking?', especially when the ideologies and groups they identify with are so pathologically extreme. I now find myself wondering if they aren't driven primarily by thinking but by an overwhelming *feeling*. If we don't meet such young people now at their felt point of need, others will do so – and the results could be disastrous.

If you work with young people on the edges of families, groups or society today:

- 🗨️ How far do spiritual-existential and social-psychological needs for (1) belonging, (2) sense-making and (3) making a difference, feature as a focus in your work?
- 🗨️ If your work is informed by Christian beliefs and values, how well do you communicate, model and engage young people authentically with the gospel of Jesus Christ?
- 🗨️ If you want to offer an inspiring counter-narrative and stance, how sharply are you presenting Jesus' cutting-edge call to (1) radical relationship, (2) radical truth, and (3) radical purpose?

Our imperative is now: Pray. Reach out. Act.

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