

A M E R I C A N F R I E N D S S E R V I C E C O M M I T T E E

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YOUTH PROGRAM AT MITTELHOF
(AFSC Neighborhood Center in Berlin)
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Introduction

The following is an attempt to summarize the tangible results of eight months work at Mittelhof. When it comes to putting it down in concrete terms, it is amazing how little there is to report. I do not feel apologetic about this, for I am convinced that the most significant part of our work in the neighborhood centers is intangible and not capable of being written into a report. The willingness to spend an hour when someone asks for five minutes, the ability to be relaxed and unhurried in the midst of tension, the readiness to try to help find solutions to difficult problems in terms of basic spiritual values, the patience to await the development of a sound program rather than accept easy temporary solutions - these more than the tangible things are responsible for the spirit that should radiate from the center.

Background

The setting in which we are trying to work with young people is one of very general hopelessness and cynicism in the face of both material and spiritual conflicts which cannot be avoided. The struggle for a living, for food and shelter and fuel, for opportunity and education is a real and a serious struggle. No less real is the struggle for integrity. The standards of behaviour of National Socialism have proved false. The victorious powers cannot agree among themselves on the new standards. People are punished because they did not oppose the Nazi Government when their consciences directed them to do so, then they are punished when, because of their consciences, they oppose their Occupation Government. In Berlin especially, they are constantly faced by a barrage of conflicting propaganda so that it is nearly impossible to discover the truth. It was agreed even among older people that it is not possible to respect Christian moral standards and continue to live. There is at the same time a great deal of searching for something firm to live by. A searching that too often loses itself in philosophical and political discussion which is sincere but never gets to the point of action, and therefore never gives any lasting satisfaction.

A young man, speaking to a British C.C.G. youth officer recently said: "The Russians want to impose a dictatorship on us, and we do not trust them; the Americans want to use us against Russia, and we do not trust them either. You want to impose the 'British Way' on us just because it is British. We cannot even trust our own German leaders who have failed already once, and now think only of one party or confession." Asked if he trusted anyone at all, he replied: "Yes, we trust the Quakers. They wish only our good and upon them we rely." The neighborhood centers have an opportunity and an obligation to offer something more basic and more dynamic than just another dogma. They should be developing methods of thinking that do not lead to frustration and cynicism, methods of turning the searching toward creative thinking that leads to constructive action. The Centers should be places where young people may face problems honestly and in true perspective, places where humanity comes before nationalism, where

the urge to do something well finds an outlet, where service to others provides real joy. They should at the same time be places of love and sympathy and understanding. Perhaps one of our most significant community services would be to help produce from Germany's youth a few really responsible spiritually mature citizens.

Method

At Mittelhof, we have developed a variety of youth groups and other youth activities which afford us a good basis upon which to build. It is too early to say that we are actually realizing the aims just stated, but a beginning has been made. The most promising experience has grown out of some of the smaller groups that meet every week for an evening together and has gone far enough to suggest a method that seems to be particularly well suited to the neighborhood center program. A small group of from eight to twenty young people comes together regularly to pursue a common interest such as music or folk dancing. This interest is one which requires effort and offers the reward of real accomplishment. There is a satisfaction in doing something well which goes far to counteract frustration and to open the way for newer fresher ideas. Some of the groups have met only for discussion of current problems, but they run the risk of becoming formal "discussion groups" which indulge in much theory and little practice.

After some time, the group fuses into a closely knit unit. The members come not only for the recreational value of the program, but because they enjoy each other's company. As the companionship grows into deeper friendship, they begin to discuss today's problems not merely in theoretical terms, but in terms of the realities of their own experience. They begin as a group to help each other as a matter of course and to enjoy helping others in the community. It is not an exaggeration to say that an evening once a week of square-dancing or singing or amateur dramatics in such a group can change the whole outlook with which a member faces the rest of the week. The leader of the group must have patience to wait for the group itself to develop its program, but at the same time he must be ready with constructive suggestions and projects. He must be sensitive to the individual personalities making up the group. He must keep the membership stable enough to allow group spirit to develop and yet he must prevent it from becoming a clique that closes itself off from the rest of the community.

Two basic questions so frequently asked in one way or another today are whether there is any real reason to hope in any way to overcome the physical and spiritual rubble left by the war, and whether it is practically possible today to live in accordance with Christian principles. Within the groups it should be possible after a while to approach these questions in terms of accomplished fact.

Administration

The whole youth work program at Mittelhof is administered by a Jugendrat or Youth Council made up of representatives chosen by each separate group (including "guest" groups) together with two representatives from the staff. The Jugendrat meets once every two weeks to form the policy for the program and to maintain a liaison between the groups, the staff, and the board of directors. It does not determine the details of program in the separate groups, but guides the over-all work of the center as a unified whole. The Jugendrat also suggests and plans special parties or projects which involve more than one group. An example is the spring party held last April for all the young people that come to Mittelhof. This party involved the entire house and staff as well as the separate groups. Although many of the groups contributed to the preparations and program, the planning and coordination of the whole into a successful party was done by the Jugendrat.

Monday Youth Group

This was the first young people's group to meet in Mittelhof. It originally consisted of a group of about 15 boys and girls called together from acquaintances of the original staff members for discussion meetings once a week. It became too large to continue profitably as a discussion group and with the increased size it became uncertain of its purpose as a group. Finally the group decided to divide into several groups with particular interests. All members however, wanted to remain in close touch with each other and decided to continue meetings once a month of the whole membership together. This attempt to maintain the continuity of the group was only partly successful for there was no single unifying interest. Such a unification has now taken place with the proposal of a film project for the group. A moving picture camera and some films are on hand and the group proposes to write a script and then produce a film. This project has aroused a lot of enthusiasm and will certainly provide good recreation and education during the course of the summer. It should be foreseen that when this project is completed another such project may be needed to provide a center of gravity for the once a month meetings. A project will very probably come from the group itself, but the Jugendrat or youth leader should be prepared with suggestions if necessary.

The separate sub-groups who make up the Monday group consist of:

Music Group - The Music group consists of 10 - 12 members who are particularly interested in classical music. Some of them are themselves good musicians. They have spent their meetings playing and discussing music. At the same time they have become closely acquainted with each other and now find many interests together in addition to music. Leadership for the group is primarily in the hands of Klaus Luebke.

Discussion Groups - A group of 10 boys and girls from the Monday group has formed a discussion group in which they particularly concern themselves with problems which arise within the family which is crowded into very little space, and with similar questions which have to do with relationships between young people and their families. This group has been meeting under the leadership of Irma Mueller-Edom. A second discussion group under the leadership of Curt Nuthmann has been started very recently. The group consists for the most part of University students with a few others. They have discussed a variety of subjects without holding to one single theme.

Two other sub groups, one interested in art and another interested in science, were formed but failed to hold together, partly for lack of adequate leadership and partly because the members in each group were students who had little time to provide their own program.

Claude Shotts Group

The Claude Shotts Group originated in Claude Shotts' home when he was in Berlin with CRALOG. It later moved to Mittelhof after his departure from Berlin. It is purely a discussion group with a membership of about 30 people most of whom are professionally occupied as doctors, teachers, secretaries, etc. They have discussed a variety of questions varying from world politics to personal religion. All discussions are in English. Because the size of the group has grown somewhat large for good discussions, it is probable that it will divide into two groups meeting simultaneously. The members have a very active interest and have a sufficient variety and quality of training that they do not need any very close leadership.

Folkdance Group.

A folkdance group was started in the spring of this year as a small group interested in really learning a variety of folkdances. Actually the group has learned to date only American square dances although it is still intended to learn European dances as well. The group consists of students at the Kunstgewerbe Schule in Wannsee and a number of other students and young people from the neighborhood. The membership is about 16 and has grown into a very intimate group of friends who enjoy very much doing things together. They have also spent some time singing together and might develop into a small chorus.

Bund Deutscher Jugend.

The BDJ originally came to Mittelhof as a guest group when they had no other place to meet. They now have three separate group meetings at different times in Mittelhof, two of boys of different ages and one of girls. They have their own program and leadership in charge of Wolfgang Barthelmei. They have very much grown into the atmosphere and purpose of Mittelhof so that they are scarcely considered any longer as a guest group.

World Friendship League.

The World Friendship League has its HQ in London. A group recently formed in Berlin asked the Mittelhof for meeting space. They have been meeting once a week and have the purpose of stimulating contact and discussion with young people of many nations. Actually at the present the membership is all German and they have been occupied largely with getting acquainted with each other. It is too early to see just how the group will develop.

Die Falken.

Another guest group at Mittelhof is the Falken Group. They are much younger than most of the other members of the youth groups here and perhaps as a result, they have to date mixed very little with the overall youth program. They have their own leader and their own program which is largely determined by the overall socialist youth program.

English Discussion Group.

A discussion group whose purpose it is to learn English has started to meet under the guidance of Mrs. Studd. They have met only two or three times but will probably become an integral part of the youth work program.

Kinder Club.

This is a small group of 10 - 14 year old boys who have met to play games and participate in craft work. The group has suffered very much from lack of leadership. At present, they have been doing craft work with Herrn Rueckert and playing organized games with Herrn Jossypowitsch. It would be possible to do much better work with boys and girls in this age group if there were qualified leadership on hand.

Future Development.

It would be possible to initiate a good deal of practical work at Mittelhof or in the neighborhood using the interest and membership of the assisting groups. To do this it will be necessary for someone to provide material and equipment such as paint, cement, garden tools, etc. and a certain amount of guidance. All of this calls for more leadership from the Mittelhof staff than will exist after the departures of

Francis Dart and Irma Mueller-Edom. I strongly feel that there should be a full time German staff member concerned only with the youth program who would then work together with an American staff member. A full time youth leader at Mittelhof should be responsible for the scheduling and integrating of the group programs and for provision of the technical facilities necessary. He should help to plan and organize special programs such as week-end conferences, parties, service projects, etc. He should organize new groups when there is a need and an opportunity to do so. This involves finding qualified technical leadership, equipment, meetingspace, etc., as well as stimulating interest and fitting the new group into the overall program. He should have time to participate in many of the group activities getting well acquainted with the group members and helping to keep the leadership and thinking on a high enough level. He should be expected to spend some time locating resources, material, reading books and magazines, attending the theater, meeting other people engaged in similar work individually or at conferences and leaders' meetings. He should act as the executive arm and liaison for the Jugendrat. Most important of all, he must be a person of considerable maturity and genuine spiritual depth. The particular circumstances in Germany nearly require that a full time youth leader at Mittelhof be an amateur for most of the younger professional youth leaders obtained their training and experience under Nazi leadership and must have shared the Nazi philosophy in order to be accepted in such training. On the other hand, most of the older professional youth leaders are too old; for the young people are interested in today's problems and are generally unwilling to be told about the way in which it was done in 1930.
