

Conference Report

# Partnership in Youth Work

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UNTIL JULY 1966, when I attended a conference at Castle Mainau, on Lake Constance, I had never heard of the place. This certainly reflects ignorance on my part and may well be a reflection of how little the adult world cares about the efforts of people working with and for youth. I had been introduced to the "Mainau" approach to youth work by Dover borstal's tutor organiser, Mr. Derek Howard, whose enthusiasm for Mainau decided me to see for myself: the department gave me leave, the International Centre granted a scholarship, I flew to Zurich and then by train to Constance.

The "Isle" goes back to the first century: the Romans used it as a fortress. Later it housed a monastery, firstly Benedictine, latterly Teutonic. The castle-palace, built around 1740 in the baroque style, has belonged to several owners, the present lord of the castle being Count Lennart Bernadotte, a nephew of the King of Sweden, who (besides developing the world-famous gardens) founded, nearly 20 years ago, the International Centre which is now under the auspices of the World Council of

the Y.M.C.A. In a world full of political and economic tensions, young people and Christian youth leaders meet on an interdenominational basis.

Fifty delegates, from 10 countries mostly Scandinavian, students, teachers, youth, Church or scout leaders, met to consider "Partnership in Youth Work". There was only one other delegate who, like me, could be described as "government employee working with young people". The average age of the delegates was 22 years.

Formerly a German army officer (and a prisoner-of-war in Russia), Professor Kuchenhoff is the present director of the German Youth Institute. When he talked to us it was interesting to recall that the centre's first task, post-war, had been to de-Nazify the German youth movements. The professor stressed that partnership could only be achieved through positive action in thinking and learning. It was, perhaps, something of a surprise to hear the British sense of fair play and sportsmanship quoted as an example of partnership. Perhaps we don't see ourselves as others see us!

Mr. J. Henk Stitger, a medical

student at the outbreak of war, spent some time in concentration camps. He is interested in the "Open Door" work and making contact with the "Lonely Crowd" through his work as a Y.M.C.A. secretary in the Netherlands. In describing the social and cultural barriers which have to be surmounted he maintained that the division of the Church itself was by no means the least of these. In thinking of the youth leader in terms of group work he illustrated the conflict between the traditional approach and the partnership approach as a struggle on the part of the individual leader to overcome his own prejudices so that he can be neutral and meet people with an open mind and heart.

Dr. Fischer, deputy director, spoke of the youth leader as counsellor; the traditional inward-looking narrow groups of yesterday were contrasted with the complexities of modern life, which he described as "the anonymous society" where young people lived on two horizons, the family and profession as opposed to just the family, and where their protest reaction was against the adult world who seemed to have failed to give meaning and purpose to life. Counsellors were urged "See and recognise your own limitations. Do not merely do something with a person, but teach him to accept himself and make his own judgment. Remember a man has his individual dignity. Man is always changing: accept him as he is now. The

counsellor must be Jew to the Jew and Greek to the Greek. Diagnosis alone does not solve a problem: if a man's house has collapsed, telling how and why it happened will not build it up".

Mr. Willi Erl, Y.M.C.A. worker now secretary of the centre, summing up, said: "Partnership is an educational principle based on democracy and tolerance. Age, title or position do not count, only honesty and sincerity. Ideas are power and give energy. Don't try to do everything. Your enthusiasm will be contagious. Be courageous to be unpopular, be patient. If people seem set in their ways, have courage. The leader is at his best if people hardly know of his existence. They will think 'this is what we did by ourselves'".

In discussion the groups presented very little constructive criticism, only praise and agreement with the speakers. This in itself was very significant because many of the delegates from Scandinavian countries had strict and deep-rooted religious backgrounds stemming from Lutheran and Swedish Free Church teaching which is very contrary to the partnership approach. On the other hand, the Church presented some extremely positive views on the sinfulness of dancing, drinking and smoking.

Conflict for some of the delegates (I felt) was in this area of Church teaching, inward-looking in concept—"keep out the bad apple" and "do not allow bad companionship to corrupt good morals", whereas

those who called themselves more progressive were in favour of attracting into the Church the indifferent element, perhaps by having dancing, a bar and other incentives.

Many delegates were interested in my work as a borstal officer, in our delinquency problems and our attitude to the offender.

Looking back, I do not think anyone could have failed to be impressed by the tremendous enthusiasm of the Mainau staff and the sincere interest of the delegates. It was refreshing to be involved in a real attempt to look at the problems of modern society, how they were affecting young people, and how the young people themselves could be encouraged towards better self-understanding.

My own experiences may have made me something of a cynic. Nevertheless I feel the principle of partnership is an admirable approach in the field of human relationships, although my instincts

tell me that this is too much for some people; that is too high a standard to achieve . . . all of which makes it comforting to know that the Mainau tradition goes on.

### Two final thoughts:

Dr. Fischer told me that when many young Germans were being taught about the Nazis they declared that they did not accept this as a part of their heritage, and that all the Hitler period was the responsibility of that generation. They were rather taken aback when told that if they considered Bach and Beethoven as part of their heritage they could not just exclude something unpleasant like the concentration camps.

On my return home, on making enquiries about accommodation for a homeless young man about to be discharged I was informed the particular Y.M.C.A. would *not* accept anyone who had been "inside".

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### *Your Letters*

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