

The situation of kids and youth in Europe today

If I were to describe the spiritual situation of the over one hundred million children and youth living in Europe today, two opposite words spring to mind: *'hope'* and *'despair'*.

The fact that Christianity is declining in Europe and Christians are becoming a minority has had a profound affect upon young people. Large numbers of Europeans no longer know what Christianity is really about; in some areas they would rather discuss the merits of cheese than Jesus, the Son of God. The 21st century is not only called Europe's post-Christian era but the anti-Christian era. At the same time there is a definite rise in spiritual hunger, and people of all ages are looking everywhere to satisfy an urgent, inner restlessness.

The breakdown of Christian morals and values has had massive consequences for our society, leading to various degrees of corruption, exploitation, abuse, abortions, and human trafficking, to mention just a few of the problems. Without the acceptance of common values, families—the foundation of society—break apart, and children are often brought up in alternative homes or by single fathers and mothers. Some accept this is an everyday reality, for others the brokenness is internalised, causing permanent emotional damage.

'Home' is for too many of today's kids and youth simply a place to stay overnight. Friends are much more of a family to them than people they're related to. Depending on their parents' educational background and their own upbringing, each one expresses their yearning for satisfaction and fulfillment in a different way.

Youth in general have become strongly individualistic. Often they do not think of the consequences their behavior will have on other people and, in the long run, on all of European society. As the gap between rich and poor widens, we also see increasing divisions between the less educated, underprivileged youth and those who are better off. The underprivileged are often very consumption-oriented. They seem to have little personal ambition or social concern and are more focused on survival. Their main consideration is how much can they consume with the least effort and investment. Entertainment, drugs and sex dominate their lives. Sadly, this tendency often starts in childhood and leads to lives of criminality and abuse.

More advantaged young people, on the other hand, tend to be influenced by modern communications and the media. iPods, mobile phones and PCs rule their lives. They are more likely to pursue academic and social achievement and, as they become older, become involved in environmental and political action. Provided with a cause to live for these youth can be committed and radical; but they may not remain enthusiastic for very long.

This latter group in our society is very much shaped by postmodern thinking that construes everything, including faith, as relative. Secularisation and falsely-constructed notions about Christianity have made a huge impact. They disengage from anything that poses as an authoritative truth. Truth is no longer to be discovered but created. Everyone has their own beliefs. This crisis of truth leads to a climate of tolerance, where all values, beliefs and claims to truth are equal.

In their quest for satisfaction and fulfillment, what can Christianity offer to these two very different groups of young people? How can we empower them?

- Each young person has a longing to be **part of a family**, to belong to a community. Involving this generation in a church or fellowship where they can find their place and are accepted and loved unconditionally will bring healing to their souls. Where there are spiritual fathers and mothers, role models who coach them through the early stages of adulthood, a new generation of good leaders will develop.
- Each of them wants to be **part of something important**. Wherever churches offer not only a place to go but a place for action, making them part of a reformation process, these young people will be highly dedicated. We need to offer social evangelistic projects where they can be involved and help bring about change.
- Each of them has a longing to know the **meaning of their life**; their calling. When the church offers the answers to these big questions of life--where do I come from, why am I here on this earth, where do I go after life?—they find satisfaction and true fulfillment, and they will be freed from dependencies.
- We can help them to develop a **missional lifestyle**. Once youth have become Christians their churches should not just absorb them into their communities, but pave the way for them to be witnesses in their schools, universities and workplaces. Above this, they should be encouraged to engage in social, political and environmental causes as well as world missions. At the same time we can invest in teaching and guiding them to develop their own personalities, based on Biblical truth.
- We can encourage, mentor and train Christian youth leaders who will be positive examples to their peers.

Before we can hope to win this generation for Christ, our challenge as Christians is to understand what drives them. Once we do that we can help the youth around us identify their own deepest needs, and lead them to the forgiveness, repentance and salvation found only in Christ.

Without encountering their real and living Creator, they will not grasp who God truly is—and who they are meant to be. So, what venues can we provide where children and older youth can meet God in a language and culture they understand? Where can they experiment and discover new ways to live out faith in their generation? How can we use today's technology and media to share the Good News?

Far more than ever before, it's essential that we as Christians pull together. Reaching the next generation cannot any longer be about your denomination or mine, or about our different opinions on various issues. In all our diversity we need to portray unity in faith and live it authentically before our youth. They care far less about our denomination than how real we are in our lifestyle. What changes has Jesus made? Do our whole lives reflect what He did for us?

We are also challenged to mobilise fellow-believers and help them understand that young people without Christ are lost. Though some like to debate the 'spiritual state

of lostness' these days, let's have the courage to be less postmodern on this issue. The consequence will be finding appropriate ways to reach youth.

As Christians we need to boldly cross barriers into local social institutions, government youth departments and secular kids and teen networks, working alongside these agencies wherever possible in order to bring Christ into the equation. This is what a missional lifestyle is all about, living out our lives with Jesus wherever God places us. Too long we have kept to ourselves and tried to build our own separate Christian culture with our Christian kindergartens, schools, and so forth. These things are still valid in some areas, but more than ever we as Christians are challenged to go where young people are and live our values in the midst of this world. As European Christians now in the minority, we need to encourage each other to be Christ-followers with confidence – in word and deed.

The question that haunts me in all of this is, how does God look upon the people he has created and loves? Although his heart may often despair when looking at the misery of man, he also has hope for this generation. Europe has thousands of young men and women who seek the Father's heart and want to become radical Jesus-lovers and history-makers. These young people care about the spiritual status of their families, neighbourhoods, countries and the rest of the world. Where youth fall in love with Jesus and his body, the Church, there is an explosion of new initiatives, new methods and new churches--and they will excel, with the blessing from the older generation!

One of these new very exciting initiatives is Mission-Net. Mission-Net has at its heart a two-fold agenda: a bi-annual pan-European congress and a desired movement among European young Christians which is commissioned by the European Evangelical Missionary Association and European Evangelical Alliance.

Mission-Net is primarily made for people aged between 16-30 who are willing to consider a Christian missional lifestyle which allies spiritual expressions of the faith and practical contributions to the society's common good. We encourage young people once again to become transformers of society and therefore our slogan has become "Transforming our world".

The question we need to ask and answer while reading through the next pages is: how much will we allow God to speak to us and break our hearts anew, as his own heart is broken by this young generation? Europe's future holds enormous potential, but only if we choose to give the rising tide of youth our love, passion, prayers and lasting commitment.

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Foreword to youth section, taken from „Europe – Restoring Hope“, Deborah Meroff