

## Congregations as the development motors for a local community: two models to increase the wellbeing and life quality of children and families

*Avo Üprus*

### INTRODUCTION

Observing the post-communist face of Estonia, we can see that the scars of violence, of forced collectivism and national lie lay fresh on its skin. This impression is not only set in stone, thanks to the tasteless architecture of soviet-collective farms, but even more it is embedded in the thought and behavioural patterns. Most of the people have no trust in collaboration and collective entrepreneurship. On this foundation of the past, present liberal-democratic competitive society and market economy have been built with an unreasonable rush. Accordingly, the foundation and erected pillars are conflicting, and this status quo has foreshadowed the natural will and simple skills of conviviality. Therefore, we must redefine the simple terms of neighbourhood, community and the art and science of living together.

More sensitive Estonian ministries and non-governmental organizations have been discovering and developing participatory democracy and social entrepreneurship by being active in social processes, developing communities and providing services. In order to strengthen local identity and community, possibilities for joint activities are created. Key word for the process of upgrading diaconia is *convivencia*, which combines convivial living, sharing of the resources and developing the community in solidary way. Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church highly values the participation between the members of the Estonian Church Council and the public sector in their attempt to achieve a balance between sacral and social as well

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Estonia is considered as one the least-religious countries in Europe and from the results of a research "Religion in everyday life" (2016) we can see that only 26% of Estonians consider themselves to be Christians. However, at the same time 73% of Estonians feel that the culture of Europe should remain Christian (Pew Research Centre 2016). This is a dilemma that needs solving. People expect socially active moral from the Church but not moralization. It requires from the Church to place the focus on utmost needs of people, participation in problem solving, aid for vulnerable groups, good partnerships and decisions made on base of core values.

Two given below examples of work with surrounding community aimed to give a new life to unused sacral buildings illustrate how the Church creates good partnership and responds to the needs of the people.

## THE MODEL OF PEETELI CHURCH

In a sacral building that had been heavily amortised during the time of occupation, a centre of pastoral care for street-children was established. It has now developed into a professional institution for children from poor families and with behavioural problems. Additionally Regular sermons, concerts and seminars are held in there.

The centre with a housing possibility and responsibility for attending school creates prerequisites for children with behavioural deviation to grow and develop themselves by activating own capabilities and re-vitalizing own motivation.

Methods and strategy: work with the needs, teaching skills, development of values. Under the needs we understand the physical, mental, emotional wellbeing and development complemented by special needs and a need for support. The first contact is sought out in local environment of the kids (slums, abandoned houses, streets). Relationship of trust is developed in parallel with offering them the food and chance to clean up. No requirements or conditions are set up for the kids at this point. We start building a progressive and reciprocal partnership.

Thuswise the kids obtain a chance to live in the pastorage Peeteli that can house up to 20 children. Whenever it is possible, meetings with their biological parents are held. If need be, they can be visited in prisons or care centres. In the pastorage the children are brought up being engaged in free-time activities, hobbies, field trips to the nature and to other cities. Overnight stays and camps in Finland, Norway and Sweden are held regularly. All of these activities can help to fight with addictions, create motivation and bring up a positive change in the lives of the kids. The main requirement for living in the centre is school attendance. The youth can live in Peeteli centre until they continue their journey in education. Usual term for a child to carry on in this program from 3 to 8 years but there have been longer periods.

**Partners:** underage committees, child protection workers, police, schools, rehabilitation institutions, social centres.

**Funding:** project financing, donations from Norway, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, local municipalities and parents.

**The goal of the workers:** ensure the wellbeing of a child, a rise in life quality, prevention of ill-treatment and deviated behaviour in the future.

**Main goal:** a capable young person who is ready to take responsibility for his/her life.



Pic.1. *Urban Studies students from Estonian Art Academy who spent a cultural night in the church during September.*

## THE MODEL OF HARKUJARVE CHURCH

In 2014 an empty church building on the edge of Tallinn was re-developed into a community centre and a day care centre for children. The centre offers regular day care service for children at the age from 1-3 years old and for children with severe disabilities at the age from 1-18 years old. Support for their families is also offered. The European Regional Development Fund financed project SEMPRE (Social Empowerment in Rural Areas) and has helped to form the Local Empowerment Network which then worked closely with the community for development of the best kind of service addressed to the end-user. The target groups were families with children in Harkujärve and local school students.

The mission is to provide an opportunity to use time for meaningful activities, participation in decision-making and improvement of the wellbeing of the neighbourhood, facilitation the quality and accessibility of the provided services.

**Methods and strategy:** Participation, inclusion, developing habits, moral values.



Donators, volunteers, entrepreneurs were involved in the renovation of the church. An NGO, Harkujärve Kiriku Taastamise Selts was created. A lot of the work has been done by volunteers but partners from outside of Estonia were also included like missionaries, experts on working with families, handymen from other ministries. Since then the rooms of the church are also being used by other NGOs. A fundraising strategy and PR campaign were created, presentations on public media and Christian channels were made. Meetings with potential partners and target groups of the services were held in order to work out the best strategies together.



Fig. 1. Based on McKinsey model of organisations (McKinsey & Company 2008)

Through well-planned activities a safe and supporting environment has been created for children to grow in, social cohesion has improved, parents and experts in their fields, pedagogues have been involved and help to improve the competence of the day care service and also of the parents. During the trust building step parents were offered to become engaged in some activities – a female dance studio was started, also gymnastics group, gardening group.

Trees and plants were planted and a recreational area on the side of the church was developed with massive benches and table so that local families can come and enjoy their free time in a beautiful place. Trainings and joint discussion meetings were held. Local people and church came together and prevented a clearance of nearby forested area. As soon as the safe environment for children was created, classes on robotics,

handicraft, drama and dance were started. Partnership with local municipality and school has been growing stronger for the third year in a row.



Pic.2. Planting cherry trees in the recreational area next to the church.

**Partners:** local municipality, Harkujärve school, people in neighbourhood, social services, NGOs.

**Funding:** good marketing, donation-based approach, project financing, selling services, funding from local municipality, fees from some classes, renting out rooms.

**Goal:** Harkujärve Community Church is a free and open place for local people and children, and simultaneously is a good partner to the local municipality, school and unions.

The families living in Harkujärve region have solidarized into a strong community with clear identity and vision. A safe and supporting environment for the children of Harkujärve, which has strongly improved the accessibility, selection and quality of the free-time activities, has been created.



Pic.3. Mayor of Harku parish Erik Sandla with Pastor Avo Üprus and the Gypsy dance studio.

The goals have been reached – community centre is working and operates on at least 5 days a week. On Sundays there are regular sermons, and at the same time the church is often used for concerts and culture events. The bonding of the community is noticeable and this has laid a solid foundation for trust and safety assets in the community. The local municipality has signed a public use contract and supports the activities in the community church with funding from the budget.



Fig.2. Two models – one conception: bring people together and be creative (Addy T. 2017)

### SUMMARY

Both of the described models are easy to multiply and apply in other countries near the Baltic sea. However, the essential question is not about copying anything but noticing and realizing the needs of the locals, offering solutions and working closely together as a community.

By participation and learning together, the community will eventually have the know-how and resources to continue and start new projects towards improvement of own well-being.

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© Published by Interdiac, January 2018

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