

Youth counts!

Mapping Christian youth work in Germany empirically and identifying presuppositions of educationally active congregations

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“You’ve got more inside the store than in the showcase” – this is a frequent response by people who get in contact with church-related youth work. Often, they are surprised by the wide ranging and lively appeal that the praxis of Christian youth work offers. Nevertheless, whoever wants to gain valid results on the reality of youth work will largely be disappointed: Only a few empirical research projects on the non-formal activities in the churches are available, many of them refer to the local level. Even more, not even the basic numbers of members and group leaders are accurately recorded. Hardly any reliable statistics exist concerning this field of work. To this day, it remains difficult to estimate the number of young people who participate in activities offered by the churches in Germany. That the church-related youth work shares this fate with other forms of youth work – in sports, music, or culture – can only be of small comfort (for an overview: Lindner 2009, Rauschenbach et al 2010; Oechler and Schmidt 2014; one of the few positive examples within the Protestant youth work is Fauser et al. 2006).

1. The (in)visibility of non-formal education within the Protestant Church in Germany

Non-formal learning has received increasing attention in Germany during the last years. Especially scholars from the influential German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) have emphasised the meaning of non-formal learning for the acquisition of general skills that are relevant for mastering one’s challenges in school as well as in everyday life (Rauschenbach 2009; Baumbast et al. 2014). While youth work and other non-formal educational settings benefited from an enhanced awareness, for example in the studies on all-day-schools and general youth research (e.g. BMFSFJ 2017), the Protestant Church still tends to neglect these fields when it comes to general studies about church membership.

In the most prominent studies commissioned by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) concerning church membership (“Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchungen”), work with children and adolescents is only marginally considered. While the keyword “church service” is mentioned more than 500 times within 450 pages, the term “youth work” is hardly mentioned in the publication of the current study concerning church membership (Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015; cf. Ilg

2017 for a more detailed analysis). In light of this, it is in no way surprising that in this study the reference to a “church for the elderly” is the guiding perspective throughout the publication. It seems to be a vicious circle: The church membership study does not ask about youth work – and ends up with the conclusion that youth activities are of small relevance for the church, both at the present and in the future.

Such empirical imbalances were the initiating reasons for two research projects commissioned by the regional Protestant Churches of Baden and Württemberg and carried out at the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Tübingen between 2013 and 2016. The aim of the projects was to take a major step in mapping Christian youth work empirically (a quantitative study) and to identify presuppositions for attractive youth activities in the parishes and Christian youth associations (with a qualitative study).

In this chapter, both research projects will be introduced. In addition to the methodologies and selected findings, the focus of the chapter lies on the question of how the studies’ findings could be presented in a way that ensures that not only other researchers benefit from them, but also local staff and voluntary workers.

2. Youth counts – the quantitative study

How could young people count in the church, if no one had ever even counted how many of them are active in the church? (cf. Lehmann and Ilg 2015, 218) This question led to the statistical project reported here. While reliable reports exist about (religious) education in schools at least to some degree, there was no overview on non-formal education in the church, especially concerning youth work or musical activities such as children’s choirs. The case was even worse: There were numbers which were published regularly, but they were incomplete. Those official figures were based on numbers every minister has to report on a yearly basis – but often the ministers are not in charge of youth work, and no one else except the ministers is asked to fill in the forms (for a detailed analysis cf. Ilg et al. 2014, 246–255).

In light of this, a comprehensive statistic of all church youth activities was a real challenge. A pilot project collecting the statistics for Protestant youth work (only in Württemberg, and only focusing on youth work in a narrow sense) successfully collected reliable results (Frieß and Ilg 2008) and became a model for the new comprehensive statistics.

In the planning phase of the new statistics, officials from various church-related fields of work signalled that not only youth work as such, but also that other non-formal fields should be looked at statistically: confirmation work, Sunday School and musical activities. Two neighbouring Churches worked together; the Protestant Churches of Baden and of Württemberg, which led to the benefit that by means of adding the data for Baden and for Württemberg, the whole federal state of

Baden-Württemberg could be covered. The research project was commissioned by these two Churches and awarded to a research group at Tübingen University.¹

2.1 Methods

The objective of the research project “Youth counts” was the statistical compilation of non-formal activities within the Protestant work with children and adolescents between 6 and 26 years of age in Baden-Württemberg. A comprehensive survey of 2500 responsible bodies (parishes as well as local or regional youth work organizations) was undertaken within the time period of the school year of 2012/13. It is important to mention, that not all of the church-related sectors were covered. For example, the Religious Education classes at school, Protestant schools, and diaconal work were not included. Those fields might be taken into account in the next statistical project, while “Youth counts” limited itself to those non-formal fields that are predominantly run by volunteers.

Besides information about the number of participants and staff involved in the different sectors, data concerning age and gender was collected. Furthermore, the frequency of the activities and additional relevant details for the different sectors were gathered, such as questions about inclusion or about the financing of school-related youth work.

The online-survey was carried out using a specially adjusted version of the software “LimeSurvey”, supported by the IT service provider “SilverAge”. 85% of the contacted responsible bodies participated in the online-survey, which led to a very solid data basis for further projections. One of the reasons of the high participation rate of the responsible bodies was the telephone hotline provided. Questions from the local participants could be answered on the phone and those who had not yet responded could be reminded to complete the survey via phone calls – a total of 150 hours on the phone for 850 calls were invested here.

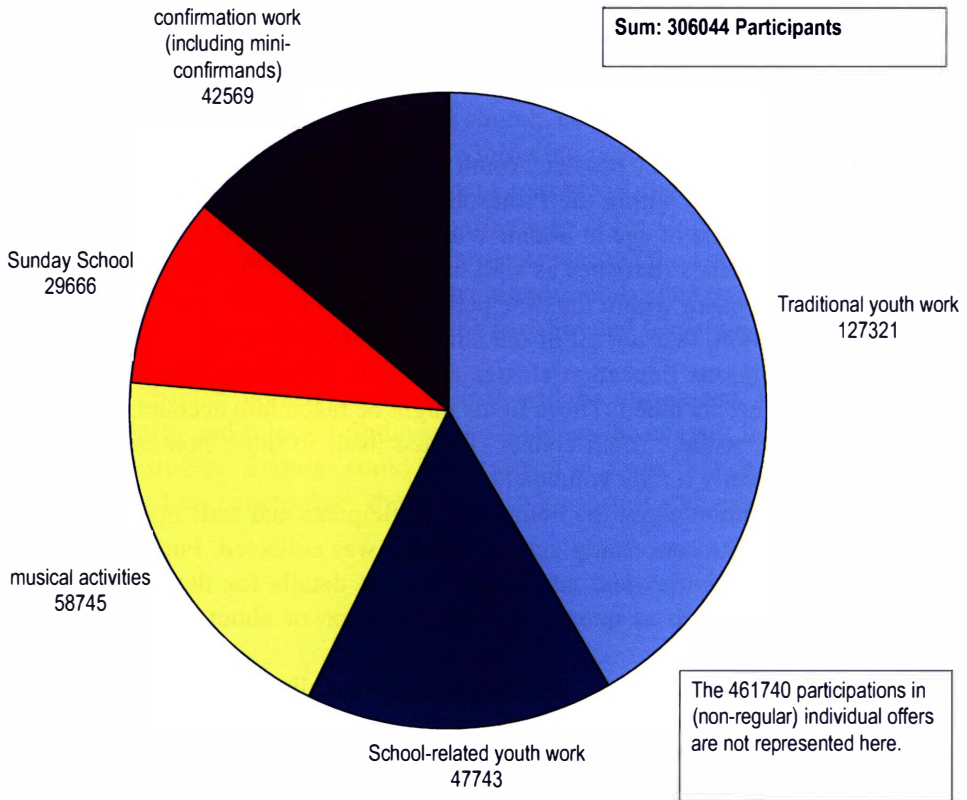
What kind of data was collected? This project did not ask the participants but rather the local responsible persons. The aim was simply to collect valid numbers about the offers, participants and workers. It was neither intended nor possible to measure effects or to analyse the contents of the activities.

2.2 Results

From the numerous data collected, some exemplary findings will be presented in the following. They all refer to the federal state of Baden-Württemberg which has about 11 million inhabitants, 3.5 millions of them are Protestant.

¹ The research group consisted among others of Friedrich Schweitzer, Peter Lehmann, Mareike Möhle, Hanne Lamparter, Nadine Quattlender, Michael Pohlens and Wolfgang Ilg. Especially Hanne Lamparter and Benjamin Ahme were involved in preparing this article.

Figure 1: Participants in the regular group offers in Baden-Württemberg 2012/13

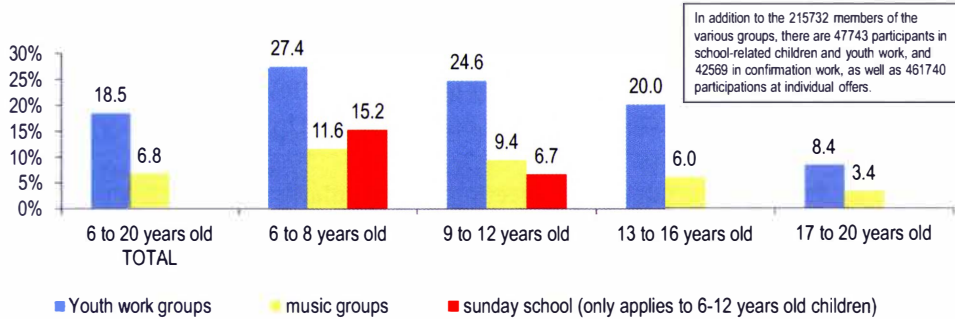


Number of participants

Within the period of the study, 306044 young people took part in one of the 15765 group offers in Baden-Württemberg. Figure 1 shows these results. This figure only depicts the youth groups taking place regularly, typically every week. 42% of these groups are groups in the context of traditional youth work. 14% are made up by confirmation work (where one has to keep in mind that only the cohort of the 13-year-old adolescents as well as, in some of the parishes, the mini-confirmands are reached). 10% of the weekly meetings are children's church services or Sunday School, 19% are groups related to music (e.g. children's choirs, brass bands). Altogether 15% are reached through activities of school-related youth work. Whereas most of the other activities moderately decreased in numbers during the last years, the number of school-related youth work activities has grown strongly throughout the last years. This comparatively new field later gained the attention of a special research project on its own (cf. Working in this volume).

In addition, there were 461740 participations at 11152 individual offers on the year, such as summer camps, seminars, or sport tournaments. The term "individ-

Figure 2: Participation rates in the regular Protestant group work in relation to Protestant children and adolescents (Baden-Württemberg, in per cent)



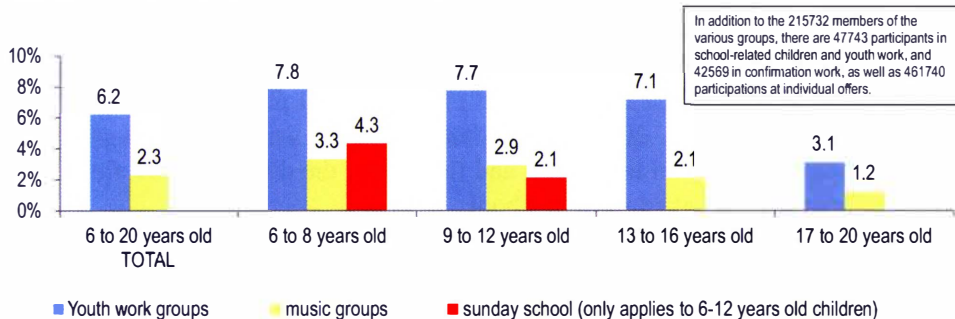
ual offers” is applied to all activities that did not take place on a regular basis, but occurred throughout the year.

Participation rates

Absolute numbers do not draw a vivid picture. What does it mean if 127321 young people take part in youth work groups regularly? A much more lucid question refers to the proportion of those who actually take part compared to all young people living in Baden-Württemberg.

When the number of participants in the children and youth work is related to the total number of Protestant 6- to 20-year-olds, this leads to a calculative participation rate of 18.5% of all Protestant children and adolescents within this cohort, as it is displayed in Figure 2. However, because of their concept, such offers are open to all young people regardless of their denomination. In Figure 3, the number of regular participants is related to data about the overall population (regardless of denomination). This leads to a total participation rate of 6.2% of all 6 to 20 years old in Baden-Württemberg. It has to be noted that only the participants at regular group activities are included here.

Figure 3: Participation rates in the regular Protestant group work in relation to all children and adolescents regardless of their denomination (Baden-Württemberg, in per cent)



Sunday School reaches (at its target age of 6–12 years) as many children as the music groups. A clear decrease of numbers for youth work and music groups is visible at the age of 17–20 years. A possible reason for this could be the adolescents' changing living conditions because of the graduation from school, the beginning of an apprenticeship, a new job, or studies at a university. However, at this age many persons become volunteers as well but are not represented in these statistics because it only refers to participants.

In sum: Protestant youth groups meeting on a regularly basis reach almost one fifth of the Protestants, which is about 6% of the total population to which Sunday School, musical activities, and many other fields have to be added. Compared to church services, with attendance rates of about 3–4% of the church members, it must be said clearly: The age group where the church sees the highest attendance of its activities is not the elderly, but youth!

Staff

In the two Protestant Churches, there are more than 70000 people working within one of the fields mentioned above – about 95% of them are volunteers. In comparison, during the period of the study there were about 97000 teachers working at public schools in Baden-Württemberg. This comparison shows just how many people are involved in children and adolescent activities in Baden-Württemberg's Protestant Churches. This means an average of 25 to 40 persons per parish.

These persons are qualified through training courses and accompanying support, for example, at courses for the youth-leader-certificate "Juleica": 36439 participated in training courses, 13665 persons in staff groups and in addition to that 2246 in trainee groups reflect the high intensity of staff training.

2.3 Dissemination strategy: making local data available

The objective of the study "Youth counts" was not only to collect data as precise as possible, but also to lay the foundations for the utilization of the data on the superordinate and the local level.

Main publication: The book "Youth counts"

The book "Youth counts" ("Jugend zählt") is the central publication of the data's overall analysis (Ilg et al. 2014). In this book, the data was edited in a standardised way and broken down into tables and figures for the different work fields. All figures in this text are taken from this book.

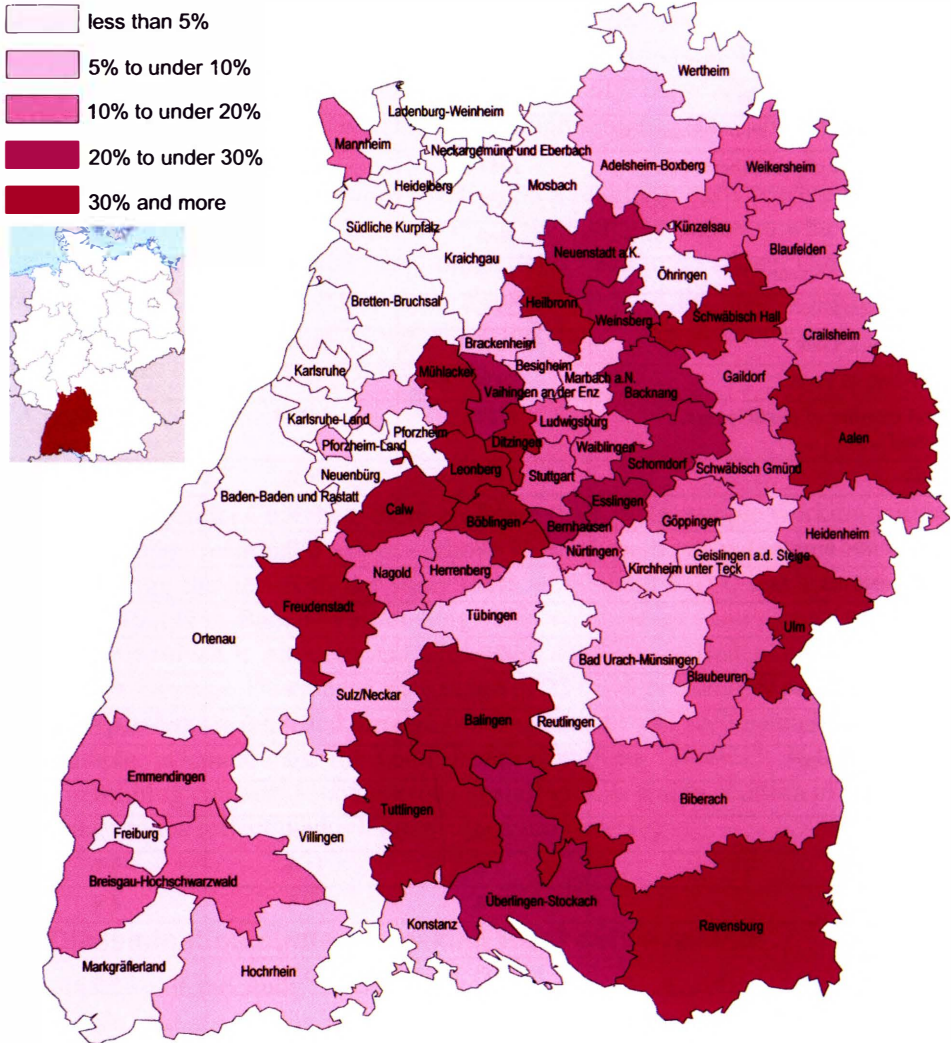
Table 1 shows the findings concerning the activities with children. The data is presented in three columns for the federal state Baden-Württemberg, the regional Church of Baden and the regional Church of Württemberg. Depending on

Table 1: Data presentation concerning work with children

	children's groups		
	Baden-Württemberg	Baden	Württemberg
Number of groups/offers	3470	787	2683
This exists in ...% of all congregations	67 %	49 %	76 %
Total number of staff, thereof ...	13517	3177	10340
female	64 %	67 %	64 %
male	36 %	33 %	36 %
younger than 16 years	12 %	12 %	11 %
16 to 17 years old	29 %	24 %	30 %
18 to 26 years old	31 %	30 %	31 %
older than 26 years	29 %	34 %	28 %
Total number of participants, thereof ...	47086	11844	35242
female	57 %	56 %	57 %
male	43 %	44 %	43 %
younger than 6 years	9 %	10 %	9 %
6 to 8 years old	35 %	39 %	34 %
9 to 12 years old	47 %	44 %	48 %
13 to 16 years old	7 %	6 %	8 %
17 to 20 years old	0 %	1 %	0 %
21 to 26 years old	0 %	0 %	0 %
older than 26 years	1 %	0 %	1 %
Frequency			
weekly	82 %	74 %	85 %
every 14 days	9 %	11 %	9 %
monthly	5 %	9 %	4 %
more seldom	1 %	2 %	1 %
project-like	2 %	5 %	2 %
Group-structure			
number of participants per activity	13.6	15.0	13.1
number of staff per activity	3.9	4.0	3.9
child-staff-ratio	3.5	3.7	3.4
percentage of female-only groups	28 %	21 %	30 %
percentage of male-only groups	23 %	17 %	25 %

Reading example: 64% of the total 13517 staff in children groups are women.

Figure 4: Proportion of parishes offering the mini-confirmands program in the church districts ("Konfi 3")



the regional affiliation and the thematic interest in one of the work fields, different conclusions that are relevant for practical applications can be drawn from the data. For example, from the perspective of public relations the number of over 47000 regularly participating children seems to be a remarkable figure. Those responsible for the training of the staff were surprised by the unexpectedly high number of adults in charge of youth and children's groups since their staff-magazines and training offers were mainly aimed at adolescent volunteers. Furthermore, those responsible for the development of new concepts noticed changes regarding the activities' frequencies: The traditional assumption, that such groups always meet on a weekly

basis, was challenged by the fact, that 18% of the groups meet only once or twice in a month. In the case of pedagogical questions regarding a kind of youth work that values interpersonal relationships, the ratio of the number of staff per child (1 to 3.5) was an important indicator of the high quality of individual mentoring, which could only be achieved because of the substantial commitment of volunteers. The data tables for all types of group offers in the book were used for discoveries like these, leading to possible conclusions for the praxis of youth work.

Figure 4 shows another way of presenting the data: Here one can see how many parishes have taken up the new way of confirmation work, called the “mini-confirmants” (Konfi 3). The parishes can decide whether they want to implement this new system or not. The map shows that it is actually implemented by 4% (Baden) and 20% (Württemberg), but the share of parishes varies according to the regional structure.

Providing data to local structures

In addition to the book as the main publication, further analyses were made and supplied to the local responsible persons. The production of several thousand individual analyses was performed by using computer programs (SPSS-Syntax) that applied the same type of analysis for different regional selections of data. Individual analyses for the number of groups, participants and staff were created for each church and administrative district and sent to them via E-Mail. These analyses followed the model of the book’s structure in order to facilitate comparisons between the local and the statewide data. This way, comparisons to the overall picture were possible.

Additionally, the demographic data were edited individually for every parish. In total, several thousand graphics were generated automatically and sent to local officials of each parish and church district, both for the “Protestant demography” and for the “overall demography”. This empowered the local agents to evaluate their situation individually and contextualise this with the overall data.

An important second effect of the data transmission was that the local agents were not only the “data suppliers” for an overarching research project, but also benefited from the findings of the project after its completion. This was an important experience that, most likely, will have a positive influence on the participation rate of future surveys.

Especially this strategy has received a lot of positive attention by practitioners in the local churches. Perhaps statistical researchers also could follow the New Testament advice of “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20,35). In other words: It is not fair to always expect local experts to send out data while rarely thinking about how they could benefit from local evaluations of their data collections. Doing so has strongly improved the acceptance for statistics in the project “Youth Counts”.

3. Youth in demand – the qualitative study

After its publication, the study “Youth Counts” was presented, among others, at the synods of both regional Churches. In the context of these presentations, a group of synod members showed a deeper interest in the subject. In January 2015, they proposed a motion with the title: “Extension of the youth study concerning the question whether there are shared characteristics between parishes whose work reaches an exceptional number of young people”. In light of the data from “Youth Counts”, the members of the synod recommended an in-depth follow-up study concerning parishes with a large and disproportionately well received range of activities. The leading question was: “Which factors contribute to the broad range of activities offered in this parish and why are they received so well?” This initiated the next study that will be described in the following.

The in-depth follow-up study “Youth in Demand” was conceptualised during spring 2015. Its implementation began in the summer of 2015 and lasted one year. The findings were presented and discussed in June 2016 at a study day in Karlsruhe with sixty experts for the work with children and adolescents. The impulses given at this meeting were included in the book which was published in fall 2016 (Pohlert et al. 2016).

Contrary to the quantitative study, the qualitative study did not aim for a complete and “objective” representation. Rather, local responsible agents were asked about their individual evaluation of – and perspectives on – the work with children and adolescents. Subjective perceptions and individual experiences are therefore paramount to this study. Its objective was not primarily to gain representative results or to test certain hypotheses, but to benefit from the rich pool of experiences, to reflect the current work, and to discover new potentials.

3.1 Methods

To find out why the work with children and adolescents succeeds in some places in a special way, interviews with employees and volunteers were conducted in 30 parishes. Furthermore, those responsible for the administration of the work with young people, Sunday School, musical activities, or confirmation work at the level of the regional Churches’ management were also interviewed. The findings of “Youth Counts” fed into the selection of the parishes: The “most successful” fifth of the parishes were selected and accounted for the list of such parishes, from which a random sample received letters of invitation to participate in the interview study. Both the quantity of the activities (number of children reached, number of activities, both relative to the size of the congregation) and the range of activities were relevant for the selection of “successful parishes”. Additionally, a preferably even distribution according to diverse criteria (Baden/Württemberg, rural/urban, small/mid-sized/large congregations) was looked after. About half of the parishes contacted agreed on an interview.

At 30 parishes, two rounds of interviews were conducted. One with three to six volunteers and another with the minister and other employees (where appropriate). Every interview was scheduled for one and a half hours. The interviews were semi-standardised, but started with an open introductory question, “What do you think are the factors contributing to the success of the work with young people in your parish?” The respondents were able to communicate “unfiltered expert knowledge”. In the interviews with volunteers, the participants initially wrote down their responses on their own. In the second part, they were asked concretely and in a structured way about the role of the local presuppositions, the cooperation of employees and volunteers, financial resources, etc.

The interviews concluded with a question about their wishes for – and perspectives on – their work in the future. In total, 185 people were interviewed, 56 were employees and 129 volunteers. The interviews were recorded with digital recorders and subsequently fully transcribed, which resulted in 1500 pages of text. The analysis was made with the method of structured qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2014). With the help of the software MAXQDA, the texts were encoded and individual text passages were allocated to one of the thematic areas from a previously compiled system of categories. The accumulation of text passages was then content-wise combined and analysed, which was followed by a multistage discussion process within the team and with experts for the respective areas (also including a study day during the final stage of the research project). For the 200 pages report printed in the book, all of the personal data and geographical information were anonymised. After a comprehensive presentation of the findings from the interviews and numerous direct quotes, each of the chapters culminates in further reaching impulses derived from the findings.

3.2 Results

As expected, the content of the interviews proved to be multifaceted. They reflect the diversity and the different profiles of the selected parishes. Thus, as expected no universal remedy could be identified that would guarantee a successful work with children and adolescents. Anyhow, this was never the intention. In fact, impulses and suggestions are made, which need to be adjusted to the local presuppositions. In spite of the multitude of answers, it was possible to summarise success factors for the work with young people in the final chapter of the study.

Firstly, as it was said in many interviews, the activities must be centered about young people and their ideas. Not the institutional interest of the church, but the needs of young people are decisive and young people show a high appreciation of personal relationships. Secondly, the reference point for church youth work should be the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is communicated in diverse and very different ways, explicitly and implicitly. Thirdly, the work of the church as a critical counterpart of the school should display its specific opportunities removed from the

pressure of good grades, patronising instruction and imposed duties. The work with children and adolescents, fourthly, should confront the challenges of a culturally, ideologically and religiously plural society. With these general criteria in mind, twenty theses were formulated. They concretely tackle different aspects which – as the study showed – significantly contribute to the success of church-related work with children and adolescents. Three of the theses will be described as examples in the following section.

“Successful work has a different form in each congregation” (Thesis 1 and 4):

The work strongly depends on presuppositions like the surrounding social environment, the profile of the respective congregation, and the responsible persons. Each local surrounding features different opportunities and challenges. Congregations that are aware of this and correlate the content and organization of their work with the surrounding presuppositions provide an enormous contribution to the success of their work with children and adolescents.

“Youth work is work on relationships” (Thesis 7)

The interviewees often heard that relationships and friendships count more than large-scale initiatives and elaborate programs. Many young people yearn to experience themselves as a part of a community, have a sense of belonging and make new friends. Successful work with children and adolescents opens a space for encounters and personal relationships.

“Volunteers are the treasures of youth-active congregations” (Thesis 15)

Without volunteers, much of the work with children and adolescents would be impossible. Often, appreciation and support from the congregation for the work of volunteers has been identified as a factor for success. This appreciation can be uttered in the form of personal conversations, through public acknowledgment, or for example through the financing of ongoing training and seminars.

3.3 Dissemination strategy: the reflection sheet

The findings in the book offered an impulse for the (continuing) development of individual concepts and a profound reflection on the current practice. But practitioners, especially volunteers, are usually not willing to read 200 pages when it comes to results. So the project team decided to follow a double strategy.

In addition to the book, a short tool was developed for users with restricted time resources: In order to facilitate the access to the results for practitioners, a reflection sheet was designed, which is publicly available and can be downloaded from

the internet (www.jugend-gefragt.de). This should promote the dissemination of the findings beyond the book and support the Protestant work with children and adolescents in the parishes. The reflection sheet contains three or four reflective questions for each of the 20 theses. The questions are supposed to encourage further contemplation, additional references to the respective chapters of the study facilitate the intake of the findings. In other words: The reflection sheet serves as an appetizer, inviting practitioners to select topics of special interest for their work, discuss concrete questions and take a deeper look into the book. Figure 5 provides an example of how the reflection sheet looks.

Thesis 6

Prerequisites like rooms or financial resources do not guarantee flourishing youth work, however, their absence can limit the opportunities massively. Offers for children and adolescents require their own equipment. It is part of the respectful contact to volunteers that parishes provide the necessary resources (rooms, work materials, petty cash for groups) in a straightforward manner. The reflection of possible new financial and other resources is part of the central tasks of managing committees.

Questions for reflection

- Which rooms and materials are especially valuable to us?
- How could we use cooperations to extend the present material pool for us and others?
- How long does it take until new volunteers receive a key to the parish hall?
- How large is the administrative burden for a group leader to account for new work materials of the value of 20 Euro?

Reading recommendations

- Chapter 7 “Resources”
- Chapter 6 “Cooperations”

Figure 5: Example of the reflection sheet

4. On the reception of the studies

Both Church synods, Baden and Württemberg, discussed the results of the research projects in their meetings. In the Württemberg Church, these discussions even led to a whole synod session with a special focus on children and adolescents – for the first time within 16 years!

In a similar way, the study’s findings have been discussed locally at the level of parishes and church districts. However, very different experiences have been made.

While some church districts had very intensive discussions about their data (for example at many local synods with a special focus on “Youth Counts”), the study did not resonate in any conceivable way in other regions. It would be worth a study in its own right to survey the background and motivations for these different reactions to the study. The following factors seem to be especially significant and might be instructive for similar research projects:

- At grassroots level, there certainly is an interest in scientific findings. However, they must be delivered in “bite-sized pieces”. In order for a study to be taken up at all, there needs to be a short version of it with central findings and “easily digestible” suggestions for direct application. If it is achieved that such a “teaser” quickens the appetite, a willingness to think about a study more deeply – and ask on which basis the findings were made – emerges. Research that aims at recognition on the local level should not consider itself too good to present its findings in a popular way. For the research projects mentioned above, these “teasers” consisted of a Powerpoint-presentation with the most important findings as well as the reflection sheet, both offered as downloads freely in the internet.
- An intensive tie to the local agents should not be established only at the end of the research project, but needs to be considered from the onset. Concerning the study “Youth in Demand”, a study day meant an important intermediate step towards the completion of the final publication. Beyond questions regarding content, important impulses resulted from this study day. For example, the suggestion that the final publication should outline options of how to work with the study’s findings in committees was very helpful. This resulted in printing a chapter in the results book suggesting ways of working with the data in local church boards or other committees: A support that seems to be “unscientific” – but had an enormous effect on the study’s reception.
- Overall, it was important that, from the onset, the studies were designed not only to report their findings at the level of its complete dataset, but also to address each parish and church district with individual data and findings. This did not only improve the motivation to participate in the study considerably, but also added a genuine value for the local agents and was an incentive for them to work with the data. However, the data provided – each church district attained detailed analyses consisting of more than 100 PowerPoint slides – apparently demanded too much of many local agents, so that many exciting details were overlooked. It seems to be recommendable to limit the delivery of local results to an amount that can be processed also by people not familiar with statistics.

The question of how researchers can make sure that their findings are taken up at grassroots-level has to be considered increasingly by research projects. The planning of a study’s reception should be an integral part of its conceptualization, so that the findings can have the impact they deserve, especially in the largely unexplored field of non-formal religious education.

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