

Many are asking how the Christian message of hope can reach people who have left the church. To what extent is it relevant to the actual life experiences and questions of those who have distanced themselves internally or externally from the traditional offers/programmes of the churches? How can we embark on a journey that begins with a vague longing, curiosity, or interest, and then continues until we reach a personal relationship with God and a sense of belonging in a community?

Or does the path go from "belonging" to "believing"? The following article reports on concrete examples from the work of senfkorn STADTteilMISSION in the small East German town of Gotha/Thuringia, Germany.

Belonging comes before believing

Milestones on the path to the gospel

by Ute Paul – ute.paul@ojc.de – <https://www.senfkorn-stadtteilmission.de/>

In the senfkorn (German: *mustard seed*) shop turned into a meeting space, we watch the screen spellbound together with a handful of people. Jesus is talking to one of his disciples in the series "The Chosen." Jesus shows great patience in winning over this "chosen one" to the new way. A reorientation **of the heart** is required, on all levels. Towards oneself, towards others, towards other peoples – because God the Father does not seek good behavior first, but trust and devotion. To this end, Jesus tells his disciples and many others stories. To this end, he takes them with him on his journeys through the country. To this end, he exposes them to the strenuous community of the circle of disciples, including frustrations and dangers. He lets them participate. All so that they can slip into this paradigm shift of the heart and gradually make it their own.

At senfkorn STADTteilMISSION in Gotha West, we learn from Jesus. We long for our neighbors here in our neighborhood to find salvation and healing in Jesus. We long for them to be transformed from within by the Good News—and for that transformation to spread circles of peace around them. But "conversion" doesn't happen that quickly. Rather, it involves very personal approaches and milestones on the path to the Gospel. We are allowed to help shape these milestones and at the same time experience God's tailor-made action on people with amazement and humility.

It seems that everything begins with belonging. Very human, very simple. During Holy Week three years ago, the senfkorn shop was open every day. On the tables were stations for contemplation and creativity. Visible from outside through the glass window. Michael is there. A woman enters, looks around. She brings her life with her, her loneliness. She talks about it. The open ears are far more important than the contents on the tables. Here, people listen, the woman experiences. She comes back. Again and again. She begins to make herself useful in the small kitchen, making tea. She walks around and serves the others. We have long since addressed her by her first name, know where she lives, have been allowed to visit her, know some of the horrors of her life. God? Jesus? In a way, yes. Baptized, confirmed over 50 years ago. But "touch wood!" and "health is what matters most" remain her philosophy of life. When the shop door is vandalized and a new lock has to be installed, she is one of those who receive their own key. "I'm needed!" she says and beams. She has become an integral part of the Bible study group every Tuesday. She gets used to sharing what she has experienced and lights a candle. Many months later, one Tuesday, her neighbors ask her where she is going. "To Bible study," she replies for the first time. "They looked at me in surprise," she says, "and asked me what I was doing there. I said it was nice there and that we all stick together." Sometimes she now says her own little prayers: Dear God, help us all to get along well with each other. What could our neighborhood need more than this prayer?

On New Year's Eve, someone's entire apartment burned down due to a firework. On her daily trip to the shop, she accepts an invitation to have coffee in front of the shop. We are her wailing wall, again and again. She experiences welcome and care—and in turn brings something to eat for everyone. A nice repairman fixes her TV, which was damaged by the water used to extinguish the fire, and installs Bible TV, which becomes her daily companion. Singing together, Bible stories, store services—fresh water penetrates the parched soil of her soul. In her new apartment, she decorates the walls with souvenirs from our senfkorn meetings. When I visit her, she proudly shows me her "prayer corner": cards, pictures, photos. Even a photo of a woman who wronged her. "Whenever I walk past it, I pray for her," she tells me. And on Sunday, she had arranged to meet other women from senfkorn at the kebab shop, because now she has friends. "God got me out of my old apartment so that I could experience this."

"Jesus for All Nations" was the name of our last Advent campaign in the central square of our neighborhood. Four weeks outside with the people. How else would anyone know that there are Christians here? Which of our many international friends would dare to speak the daily short passage from the Bible in their own language? A young woman from Poland! "We need you!" was our message. She didn't miss a single day, eagerly attending the rehearsals and then letting her voice ring out loud and clear into the microphone. She couldn't be there on the last day, but asked me to play her audio recording of the day's passage. "Polish must not be missing!" was her conviction. She may still have a long way to go before "today the Savior is born unto you" takes root in her life. The experience on the square could be a milestone in this process.

"If the invited guests in the parable don't want to come to the feast, then it could also be the host's fault," someone in the Bible discovery group responds. "I can understand why people don't want anything to do with God. He doesn't do enough. Why is there still war?" I go home feeling troubled, searching for an answer. I want to defend God, argue on his behalf, not let this accusation stick to him. After all, we are the neighborhood missionaries who want to be open to dialogue, to perspectives that are unfamiliar to us; we want not only to allow authenticity, but to promote it. Is it perhaps not an accusation at all, but rather a need, a search, a lament? And lamenting before God is absolutely permissible, even indispensable, if one does not want to cower in fear but gradually entrust oneself to God. It must go through the probing questions. And so I realize that I myself am being changed in the genuine encounter with people who are on their way to the Gospel.

At the same time, it is important to sense the question behind the question. Does "God does nothing!" perhaps also mean something like, "I would so much like to experience God's intervention personally. I find it so difficult to believe in him in the face of so much suffering." Alexander Garth, representative of the Evangelical Alliance for Evangelism and Church Planting, says that the first step is for people to feel that they long for God. That they sense that there is more. Perhaps comfort, hope, meaning. The little plants grow tenderly, stretching toward the light.

A man hears the singing in the square during Advent and is drawn to it. He is surprised by the friendly welcome. He steps into the warm shop and tells his painful life story. He accepts an invitation to join 20 others at the Weinmanns' Christmas table. He sits there amazed and enthusiastic. New Year's Eve comes, and in January the first shop service. He cries during the songs, claps, shouts "Amazing!" He gets used to the weekly rhythm at senfkorn, it becomes his rhythm too. On Friday afternoons, they give thanks together and look back on the week. "Ute, I'll never say anything there!" he confides in me. Until his heart overflows when he becomes part of a renovation project – he solemnly stands up, lights a candle, and speaks in front of everyone. At the end of March, we celebrate his birthday. He brought all the ingredients himself. There are gifts and songs. "You are not a child of chance, not a whim of nature... you are a thought of God." The path will now continue toward Jesus until this man says "yes." It takes patient accompaniment, confidence, and trust in God's Spirit, who gently knocks on doors that have long been closed.

We open the shop for seven days before Easter. The motto of these afternoons is "as if we had been there." There is time for encounters, a small liturgy, and then creative activities. We want to enable access with all the senses and involve many people. Three women and three men read stories of "people" who were with Jesus in his last days. To encourage identification, the texts are written in the first person. Every day we add a biblical character – on their own "stage" with a color that reflects the mood: jubilation, remorse, fear, devotion. More than two dozen people, all from our neighborhood, listen intently. But what do they do with what they have heard? We invite them to respond: taste tears, smell nard oil, untie a knot in a short rope, tie a strip of cloth to a cross, feel the weight of a stone, draw the outlines in their notebooks. Each person finds their element, their image, their inner theme. Tears flow, prayers are said. Steps are taken on the path into the Gospel.

In the experience of belonging to a community—my name, my opinion, my story, my cooperation, even my quirks and my pains are allowed to have their place in it—the inkling germinates that there is a God who hears and sees me. The trust among each other is fertile ground for trust in God to grow as well. In order for people who are distanced from the Christian faith, either internally or externally, to feel a longing for God again, do we need far fewer programs or events, but rather places of belonging and acceptance?