

Christian coffeehouse reaches German youth

Leaders say the Café-Bohne coffeehouse has become a surrogate church for many of the city's disaffected teens

Christ, coffee and basketball have become unlikely tools for reaching German youth who are disenchanted with traditional church.

A ministry of Lauf Free Community Church, the Café-Bohne (The Coffee Bean) in Lauf an der Pegnitz, outside Nuremberg, acts as a surrogate church for many teens who credit the youth ministry with turning their lives around.

"I don't go to a traditional church," said Nicolas Schumacher, a 19-year-old café regular. "I come here, meet with friends, and attend the youth group because the people care about us and it's a lot of fun."

Although Germany is the birthplace of Martin Luther and other important names in Christian history, most of its centuries-old cathedrals are practically devoid of young people. "I skipped church every chance I could get," said 15-year-old Simon Kreuz. "There, there is no faith, only a pious service."

Many 12- to 18-year-olds find traditional churches boring and would not be involved in a Christian community at all if it weren't for the café, said Petra Becker, who runs the ministry. According to estimates from the Lutheran and Catholic churches, only about 5 percent to 10 percent of Germans are active Christians, and Operation World reports that 53 percent of these are over the age of 50.

A recent German study by the Kinder Evangelisation Bewegung (Child Evangelism Movement) showed that 86 percent of Christians made a decision for Christ before age 15, Ethos magazine reported, making youth evangelism crucial.

In addition to being a safe hang-out spot for youth, the café, which officially opened in January 2003, coordinates a variety of activities, including weekly music jams and youth groups. The ministry also hosts an annual basketball camp, put on by Becker and her team in cooperation with the American sports missionary organization News Release Basketball based in Denver.

High school and college basketball players from the United States visit various cities in Europe each summer, helping teens not only to hone their basketball skills but also to discover the message of Jesus Christ through sports, telling them "what jocks have to say about Jesus," Becker said.

For most, basketball is initially a bigger attraction than Jesus. "I sat through the daily Bible study, bored and uninterested," said Kreuz, who attended the camp in 2003. "I just wanted to play basketball."

Yet the Holy Spirit was at work in his life, and like many youth, Kreuz came to Christ the last day of camp. "What brought me to Christ were the unbelievable wonders at the basketball camp," he explained. "Things happened there that you really can't describe in words. ... On the last day of camp, I gave my life to Jesus. This decision changed my whole life. Without Jesus you are missing the best part of life on Earth. And you are missing the eternal life, the big party in heaven."

With more than 30 years' experience working with youth, Becker directs the youth ministry at Lauf Free Community Church and has a degree in counseling and social work. She and her team show the teens "that they are accepted by God and others just for who they are," Becker told Charisma. "When they feel that, then they are wide open for God's Word. "

Sometimes the teens just drink coffee and hang out. At other times they discuss topics from the weekly Bible studies or special youth conferences. Becker said many youth who come to Christ go on to work with other teens. "This is the joy of my life, what motivates me," she said. "That's the reason we make coffee."

Rebecca K. Weber in Nuremberg, Germany

For more information about Café-Bohne, write to Jugendcafé Johannisstrasse 8, 91207 Lauf a. d. Pegnitz, Germany; or log on to .

begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life'" (John 3:16).