



In Good Faith

*– Empirical conference
on children growing up in isolated
religious communities*

The Munch Museum, Oslo, 12 November 2001



Redd Barna

In Good Faith – children growing up in isolated religious communities

Report from an empirical conference on the project Go On, arranged by Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre, in the Munch Museum in Oslo, 12 November 2001.

The conference was supported by the Ministry for Education, Research and Church Affairs and the Wøyen Foundation.

Text

Ordbua Rune Andersen

Photos

Svein Erik Dahl, Samfoto

Graphic production

MacCompaniet as

This report is not comprised by stenographic minutes from the conference, but is a summary of the main views presented. Some of the articles are based on audiotapes from the conference; others have been edited by the presenters. Plenary debates and shorter presentations have not been included.

ISBN 82-7481-076-7

Contact:**Save the Children Norway**

Postboks 69 02, St. Olavs Plass, 0130 Oslo

Telephone: +47 22 99 09 00

Fax: 47 22 99 08 60

E-mail: rettighetssenteret@reddbarna.no

Web: www.reddbarna.no<<http://www.reddbarna.no>>

Content

Preface	2
Secretary General Gro Brækken, Save the Children Norway: Their Stories Made A Deep Impression	3
Ten Characteristics of a Sect	5
Project Manager Turid Berger: The Beginning And Objectives Of Go On – And Experiences Along The Way	6
Psychiatrist and head doctor at Modum Bad Psychiatric Clinic: Sick And Sound Religiousness	11
Child psychologist Magne Raundalen: The Child Investigates – The Adults Are Research Supervisors	14
18 Stories	17
Pål Hilmar Sollie: The Time Of Truth	20
County Governor Ann-Kristin Olsen: We Must Fight The Abuse – Not The Religious Communities.....	24
Secretary of The Swedish Report, In Good Faith: Indifferent Silence After The Swedish Report	26
Defector From Word of Life: Defected After 17 Years and was free	30
Keywords From The Buzz Groups	34
Director of Save the Children Norway’s Child Rights Centre	42

Preface

Save the Children Norway implemented a two-year long pilot project focusing on children growing up in fundamentalist Christian communities.

The project was initiated when a group of youths who had broken with isolated religious societies contacted Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre. The youths asked for help and support to have their rights protected and to move on with their lives. Hence, the project was named Go On.

The youths told us about a childhood we had little or no knowledge about. They told us about a childhood marked by isolation, anxiety, disrupted or inadequate primary education and serious violations of rights, including the rights to freedom of speech, freedom of belief and freedom of thought. They were brave, fearless and strong youths who were willing to tell their stories and use their experiences to shed light on the problems and systematic violations of rights they believe is the reality for many children in isolated religious communities.

In cooperation with these youths, the two year long pilot project Go On was established, with support from the Ministry for Education, Research and Church Affairs and the Wøyen Foundation. Save the Children Norway initiated cooperation with a group of professionals with competence in children's rights, the Norwegian school system and social support services. Lawyer Turid Berger has been Project Manager, and Ellen Kartnes and Randi Enes – all from the Østkanten office community – have implemented the project. They have provided broad follow-up and support to children and young adults under 25 years of age who have participated in the project, all of whom have grown up in isolated religious communities.

This project report is based on the conference "In Good Faith", which summed up the experiences that evolved from the project.

This report calls attention to the importance of listening to children's stories. Our experiences also show that very few have any knowledge about the problems of many children in isolated religious communities. The results from the project tell us of serious and coarse violations of children's rights that require attention and action. The report also points out the need for more knowledge about childhood in isolated societies, and the need for more research in the field both nationally and internationally.

We have also revealed that the public supervision of private religious schools is inadequate with regards to the UN Convention on Children's Rights.

The project has provided us with new insight into a childhood we have had little knowledge about, both in Norway and internationally. This is knowledge that is essential to everyone concerned about the protection of children's rights.

Listen to the children, it is worthwhile!

Enjoy the reading.

Marianne Borgen
Director of Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre

January 2003

Secretary General Gro Brækken, Save the Children Norway

Their Stories Made A Deep Impression

Without the courage and involvement of these young people, there would have been no project based on such difficult and demanding issues, as Save the Children Norway lacks knowledge in this field. Together with Dag Hareide, the youths convinced the political management of the Ministry for Education, Research and Church Affairs that this is an area where children are being denied their rights and where new knowledge is necessary. This was the essence of the introductory speech to the conference, "In good faith", given by Secretary General in Save the Children Norway, Gro Brækken.

In his introductory speech, project initiator Dag Hareide was happy to note that the level of delegate participation in the conference was indeed good:

"Present here are politicians from the Parliament, county and municipal councils. Present are representatives of the public health and social services. Present are students, parents and staff from public and private schools. Present are researchers, journalists and people belonging to various religious communities. And present are young people who have broken with closed religious communities. It is also a pleasure to note that participants of the conference are not only



Secretary General Gro Brækken held the introductory speech. Without the courage and involvement of these young people, there would have been no project she stressed.

from Norway. We have participants from Sweden and England as well."

Lack Of Knowledge

Secretary General of Save the Children Norway, Gro Brækken, agreed:

"Save the Children is very happy to see that so many have found their way to this conference in the search for more information and a better insight into a childhood few of us know anything about. Before the project started, Save the Children Norway had no knowledge about children growing up in isolated religious communities. We had never worked in this area before.

Our starting point was a meeting with the youths who initiated the project. Their stories and experiences left a deep impression on the staff at Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre. It soon became evident that these youths had experienced violations of many crucial rights, both according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and according to domestic laws. As Save the Children is a rights organisation for children, we promised that we would work to initiate a project aiming to help and support children and youths that needed it. The project would also aim to bring about new knowledge in an area in which we had little previous experience.

Committed And Courageous Youths

It must be underlined that this project never would have existed without the involvement and courage of these youths. By talking openly about their own upbringing and lives, they managed to shed light on the childhood of some children that we adults had not seen or not wanted to see.

It should also be pointed out that the youths, together with Dag Hareide, managed to convey to the former political management of the Ministry for Education, Research and Church Affairs that this is an area where children's rights are being violated and where they need help. It is also an area where we need new knowledge.

Save the Children Norway soon realised that we were entering a difficult and complicated terrain, where, among others, a child's right to freedom of speech, freedom of belief and freedom of thought could be in conflict with their parents' rights to influence and guide their child. We in Save the Children Norway are the first to ac-

knowledge that this is a difficult and demanding area. We were therefore very happy to quickly make contact with the Østkanten office community, and lawyer Turid Berger, who later became our cooperative partners in this project. Save the Children depended on experienced and highly competent cooperative partners in order to take on such a demanding project. Together we produced a project draft, where the youths were obvious and active contributors. When the Ministry showed the political courage to support the project financially, the two-year long pilot project 'Go On' became a reality.

We have now reached the final phase of the project, and it is the first time in Norway that an empirical conference is being held with the focus on children growing up in isolated religious communities. This project has also been given attention internationally, as this is an area where little knowledge exists. We are therefore very pleased that international guests and participants are attending the conference today."

Ten Characteristics Of A Sect

At the conference, Dag Hareide presented an overhead with ten characteristics of a sect. A sect, he stated, is a minority in society, but it can develop and dominate society, and will then be defined as something else.

The characteristics are as follows:

1. **The sect is the truth.** The insight that is managed by the leaders of the sect is holy or exalted, often in the form of a revelation.

2. **The knowledge in the sect is hierarchical and esoteric.** Beginners are not allowed to access all knowledge and information. The knowledge is hidden and controlled by the leadership and structured so that one has to earn it over time by being obedient.

3. **The sect develops its own language, which becomes a closed universe.** The language refers to itself in a closed logical circuit. It is thought preventing and difficult to oppose. It is often mythical and irrational.

4. **Members change identity at admission.** They often take new names or nick names. The old identity is harassed. The old connections to personal economy, work, family, and friends are changed radically.

5. **The sect acquires social control.** The demand for purity means that time, money, access to other information and the basis for decisions must be controlled by the organisation.

6. **The sect leader has the power.** There is usually a leader, and the organisation is structured like a pyramid below him.

7. **The sect uses strong and simple enemy images.** The external enemy and the evil forces are outside the sect, whereas the good are inside. Those who are outside the sect have or will enter an existence less worthy (by ending up in hell, etc.)

8. **The sect maintains the image of an internal enemy.** Evil also exists on the inside in the form of sins and wrongdoings committed by the members of the sect. It is tolerated as long as sins are confessed. There is a culture of confession. Those who do not are ostracised.

9. **The aim is superior to the means.** Religious and philosophical moral systems are usually ba-

sed on universal commandments, such as it is wrong to steal, lie, etc. These commandments are made valid to all human beings. In a sect, there will often exist one moral that applies to those outside and one to those inside.

10. **To leave the sect will be met by sanctions.** Sanctions often involve being ostracised and losing all social contact.



Dag Hareide and Ellen Kartnes lead the Conference, "In good Faith".

Project Manager Turid Berger

The Beginning And Objectives Of Go On – And Experiences Along The Way

In brief, this project is about a number of children and youths who have been deprived of their childhood and are lacking in education when leaving their religious community. For some, it is also a challenge to learn to be a parent, because they wish for their child to have a different childhood than they did. These are hard facts, which the larger society may choose to close their eyes to in the name of religious freedom. But in doing so, one has chosen to disregard the interests of the children, said Project Manager Turid Berger in her presentation to the conference.

The Go On project was initiated by a group of young people who had left "The Family". Together with Dag Hareide, they persuaded the former Minister of Education, Research and Church Affairs – Jon Lilletun – to fund a two-year long pilot project. Save the Children was asked to be responsible for the project, and we in the Østkanten office community – Randi Enes, Ellen Kartnes and myself – were asked to design a project proposal and manage the implementation of the project.

The reason we were asked was our broad experience in social and judicial issues related to children.

Rights Project With Three Objectives

In cooperation with two of the young initiators we designed a project draft early in the autumn of 1999, and the project formally began in March 2000. We had been in contact with several of the initiators since the autumn of 1999.

The project has as its starting point the rights of children and youths as outlined in Norwegian laws and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It must further be pointed out that this is a pilot project in the field where no research or systematic collection of data, exist.

The purpose of the project is threefold:

- The main objective is to establish a body that can offer practical help to children, youths and young adults who have broken with isolated religious communities.
- The project will produce and communicate reliable knowledge and information about the problem area.
- Based on the experiences from the work and other knowledge acquired, the project will consider the need to educate schools and general social support services in protecting the interests and rights of these young people.

The project staff has had regular contact with 13 young people – four men and nine women – their partners, ex-partners and children from zero to seven years old. When the project began, these 13 people were in the age between 18 and 24 years old.

The frequency of contact has varied from individual to individual, ranging from 10 to 90 conversations. The conversations have been short and long. Some have lasted for hours, and on some occasions close follow-up over several

days has been necessary. Additionally, meetings on various topics and joint activities have been arranged.

We have also had sporadic personal contact with 20 individuals with larger age dispersion – three have been under-aged, some between 30 and 35 years old.

Additionally, we have had contact via email, mail and telephone with more than 60 people.

Over the last days – following news headlines prior to this conference – a number of people have contacted us to confirm that the newspaper reports are accurate. They have similar experiences, but never had the courage to tell anyone. Several have expressed that they believed no one else shared their experiences. Some have not dared to tell us their names, and some have told us that they feel persecuted by the religious community they left.

We have also had contact with various specialist environments and a number of public support services, as well as with some schools and education offices.

God's Law Rules

So far I have discussed the background to this project. I would now like to say something about which rights we believe have been violated – and how we view those violations.

Let me first start with a short story from a long time ago when I, as a newly graduated lawyer, worked as a teacher at Diakonhjemmet Hospital and College, and taught, among other topics, on the Children's Act. Some of the students were more interested in discussing a delay in the translation of the Bible to Nynorsk (one of Norway's two official languages), than to learn about the Children's Act and the Marriage Act. Several times they told me: - You have to understand, Turid, there is a law higher than the Norwegian laws, and this is God's law. Some said this as a joke, but some were serious.

Now, many years later, I must admit that these students were more right than I thought then. This is exactly what we have experienced through our contact with young and old defectors, outcasts, specialist environments, and others. God's law rules. The problem is that God's law varies strongly between the religious communities.

But first, some law. The way I see it, many

communities use religious freedom to legitimise their own treatment of children and adolescents who do not follow "the right way".

According to the Norwegian law on international conventions, parents are responsible for giving their children proper care and nurturing according to their needs and interests. Parents are responsible for stimulating their children to undertake education according to their skills and capabilities. It is a criminal offence to expose a child to physical or psychological abuse.

The parental authority and responsibility is limited, for one, by the child's right of self- and co-determination and other child rights according to Norwegian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The conflict between what parents can decide and what is decided by the state has been pushed to the extremes by some Christian private schools.

Referring to the European Convention on Human Rights, the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Convention on Economic, Social and Political Rights, some – parents, teachers, principals and politicians – believe that parents have almost unlimited authority over their children's religious and moral upbringing.

However, these conventions do restrict parents' right to decide. Parental freedom to express oneself stops where the freedom and rights of others are being violated.

Violation Of The UN Convention On The Rights Of The Child

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Child Convention) is a human rights convention on the same level as the conventions already mentioned.

I will now take a further look at the articles in the Child Convention that have been violated according to our experiences with the project.

ARTICLE 12: The right of the child to express his or her views freely, and the right to have one's views being given weight, do not seem to be present to any particular degree in many of the communities we are familiar with. Many young people have told us that they were not supposed to have a will of their own. Their behaviour should be humble and self-effacing. Many have told us: - You had to renounce the real you.

The UN Convention On The Rights Of The Child

ARTICLE 12

The right of the child to express his or her views freely, and the right to have these views being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

ARTICLE 13

The right of the child to freedom of expression; including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

ARTICLE 14

The right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

ARTICLE 16

The right of the child to not be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, or to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.

ARTICLE 19

The right of the child to be protected from maltreatment and abuse.

ARTICLE 24

The right of the child to good health – here-under the right to be provided with necessary medical assistance.

ARTICLE 28

The right of the child to education.

ARTICLE 29

The right of the child to education directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. The education should also prepare the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

ARTICLE 31

The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child.

ARTICLE 13: The right to freedom of expression and information – the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas – seems to be totally absent. Many have told us that there were strict rules with regards to what type of activities they were allowed to participate in outside the religious community, if any at all. Several have told us about prohibitions to read anything but what was allowed by the leadership of the community. Some told us of how they secretly went to the library to borrow books. And that they feared reprisals if they were caught red-handed.

ARTICLE 14: The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is the right that most often has been violated among the people we have been in contact with. Freedom of thought is to be allowed to think what you want, fantasise, make stories up, criticise and praise without being censored or have your thoughts reviewed by adults. Most of the people we have been in

touch with have been denied this right throughout their childhood. Their childhood has instead been defined for them: what to think, what to say, what to believe, what to eat, drink and wear, how to style their hair, who they should and should not talk to, and so on. They have also been taught "exercises" to use if forbidden thoughts would press forward. Freedom of conscience is to allow a child the right to follow his or her conscience, for example with regards to what is right and what is wrong. The child has the right to act according to his or her thoughts and conscience. Many have told us of how they were taught untruths about people outside the religious community. Some have told us of how they tricked "controllers" from the wider society, such as supervision of home education.

Some have also told us how they were taught to answer questions from people outside the religious community. Their responses would be

supported or reasoned with Bible quotes – or, more correctly, with the community's interpretation of the Bible. The freedom of religion is the right to choose another religion than your parents', or to choose to be a non-believer. It is unclear to us whether the people we have been in contact with, have been aware that there even exists a concept of freedom of religion. To be able to practice freedom of religion, children must be brought up in a way that enables them to make real choices when they reach the age when they can choose themselves, which is 15 years.

ARTICLE 16: The right to privacy also extends to privacy from parents. This implies that parents should accept the child as an independent individual who they cannot treat however they like, for example by reading their diaries or letters. Many of the young people we have had contact with, have not had any privacy at all. They have had few opportunities to spend time alone.

ARTICLE 19: The right to be protected from physical and mental abuse is one of the rights many feel have been violated. They have been beaten, spanked, locked in over time, and humiliated in front of members of the community. Some have been given prohibitions to speak for various periods of time. Some have for longer periods of time been kept away from their parents, including for disciplinary reasons.

ARTICLE 24: Some of the people we have had contact with, cannot remember having been brought to medical check-ups. Some have told that the community's view on doctors and modern medicine implied a belief that it would disobey God's will to receive medical assistance. Mental suffering was treated even worse. One should be healed through prayer and saved from the disease. Most of you are probably also familiar with the prohibition among Jehovah's Witnesses to receive blood transfusions, and many followers have lost dear ones because of this interpretation of the Bible.

ARTICLE 28: Several of the people we have been in contact with have not received education. They have been kept away from the public school system and have received home education where the beliefs of the religious community have coloured all teaching. The home education did not follow the requirements for this type of education. There would be more children involved than the number being reported, and the

More Research – Better Insight

From the audience: "Is it a project objective to change the practice of religious communities? If so, quite different requirements must be made to the material you present."

Turid Berger: "We would at least wish for more research into how children are being treated in religious communities, and more investigation and supervision of how the private schools – in particular those that are closed to outsiders – function. Based on our experiences from this project, we are not permitted to do anything less."

"extra" children would be hidden during controls. Further, children were being taught to give "correct", but not necessarily true, answers to questions from inspectors.

ARTICLE 29: According to both the Education Act and the Child Convention there are minimum standards as to what the primary education should contain. For one, education should develop children's personalities and talents and provide them with good general knowledge to make them valuable and independent people in the home and in society. Many of the people we have had contact with and who have attended private Christian schools, tell us that the beliefs of the religious community pervade all education, and that the school is only a continuation of the other activities of the community. They also tell us that obviously they did not dare say or did not want to say anything negative about the school when asked by outsiders. Outsiders were not worthy of the truth. Some tell us that they looked forward to high school, when they would be allowed to attend a regular school. This would be their only contact with the outside world. Several of the young people who have attended public schools experienced bullying and isolation because they dressed differently and were not allowed to take part in activities along with the other children. Some felt like outcasts because their belonging in a religious community was a "non-topic" at school.

ARTICLE 31: The right to rest, leisure and to

engage in play is something many of these people have been denied. Many were put to work from a very young age, such as household chores, handicraft, walking from door to door to sell magazines, books and cassettes, or to sing in the street or in institutions.

Denied Their Childhood – So What?

In brief, this project is about a number of children and youths who have been deprived of their childhood and are lacking in education when leaving their religious community. For some, it is also a challenge to learn to be a parent, because they wish for their child to have a different childhood than they did.

These are hard facts, which the larger society may choose to close their eyes to in the name of religious freedom. But in doing so, one has chosen to disregard the interests of the children.

It is time to find out more about how children and young people experience growing up in a religious community, how certain Christian private schools manage their education and how the supervision of home education is being performed.

The next question is: What do we wish for children and young people who are growing up in isolated religious communities?

In this field it is easy to immerse oneself in individual stories. They contain all the right ingredients, and exceed anything you would see in a television soap. It is easy to focus on all the terrible experiences of the individuals involved, to wish for revenge on their behalf, and so on.

But they themselves have not wished to appear as victims. They have coped. Many have told us that they wish for others in similar situations to know that it is possible to survive outside the community they grew up in, but that it takes time to find their new role, and to understand connections and how life works on the outside. They want help and understanding when trying to adjust to the complicated society that the Norwegian welfare state is. And almost everyone we have been in contact with does not wish to blame his or her parents. On the contrary, they want to stay in touch with them. And many strongly wish that their parents will accept that they have chosen a different life than they did.

I wish to use this opportunity to thank all of you who are here today who have given the project useful information and help. In particular, I

would like to thank the group from The Family with whom we have had frequent contact.

Without you, knowledge about the situation of children and young people in isolated religious communities would still be a silent and tabooed area.



Project Manager Turid Berger has a broad experience in social and judicial issues related to children.

*Per Anders Øien, psychiatrist and head doctor at
Modum Bad Psychiatric Clinic*

Sick And Sound Religiousness

Per Anders Øien talked about a therapeutic meeting with a woman who has grown up in a sect. "It took a lot of time, a lot of pain and many tears, and I will not say that everything is fixed, that the healing process is over. But to enter the therapeutic room and follow this person gave me an understanding of the pain one suffers when leaving one's childhood environment and frame of reference. The cost is so high."

My challenge is to talk about sick and healthy religiousness. The topic is difficult, both because religiousness in itself is a highly charged concept, and because the drawing of a line between sick and healthy is a quite controversial field.

My daily work has for many years been therapy in various forms, both at individual and group levels. It is very interesting work where I have met people in their private room, with strong emotions and "forbidden" thoughts. People working in my profession may therefore have a legitimate shyness towards leaving the relatively intimate therapeutic room and entering public space. What I will talk about today are highly personal matters somewhere in between a description of how things are perceived and a normative judgment of how things should be. What is sound and what is sick? Who is to decide what is sick?

Meeting The Individuals

I will begin with an illustration. A colleague of mine worked as a psychiatrist in northern Norway some decades ago. The psychiatric environment was at that time somewhat influenced by quite simple-minded attitudes as a result of unreflective political "main stream" movements.

One day a colleague came to the ward and was told that a patient that had been admitted the previous day insisted that he had met the Norwegian King Olav, Prince Charles and the Secretary General of NATO. According to the staff, the man was clearly psychotic. But when my colleague opened the regional newspaper, Nordlys, there was a story about how the previous day there had been a NATO exercise in Harstad where King Olav, Prince Charles and the Secretary General of NATO had been present. The revelation was met by embarrassed laughter from the staff.

Not only is this a grave story, it is also true. It is a good illustration of what I am going to talk about, because it is very easy to provide too simple answers and too simple solutions. My point of departure is meeting individuals who I have followed over a certain time period in the therapeutic room – people who have grown up in what may be defined as a sect or an isolated religious community, where many of the characteristics mentioned by Dag Hareide are clearly present.

These communities have many aspects to them. Among others, they provide a comprehensible frame of security and predictability. One does not have to "think too much". One is provided with a set of opinions and thoughts. In many ways this is quite comforting.

Soundness – what is it? Soundness is defined



Per Anders Øien is head doctor at Modum Bad – a psychiatric clinic that often is confronted with the problems that are the topics of the conference.

by a set of thoughts and opinions that are fairly solid. Let us look at another concept: to be paranoid. A common interpretation is that the paranoid believes he or she is being followed. At the same time, it is sensible to be sceptical in some situations; it is sensible to not believe everything you hear. It is pointless to accept everything in all situations at all times. This would give you trouble, and create trouble for the people around you.

There is often talk about “maintaining a steady course”. In some ways it is sound to keep a steady course. But when you transfer this concept to boats, it is idiotic to keep a steady course. You have to manoeuvre, to find out where the dangers are, where the reefs are. You have to adjust to the circumstances.

To Swing Without Breaking

The World Health Organisation (WHO) uses a definition of health and soundness, which is totally nirvana-like and impossible to achieve. It contains a range of criteria. One criterion is the ability to reconcile conflicting tendencies in your own mind – in other words, to manage conflicting thoughts and feelings without “breaking”. Even if the WHO definition does not mention it specifically, I perceive the ability to cope with frustration as particularly important. By this I mean the ability to endure hardships and rough days.

Everyone carries with them a wish to have their needs satisfied; this is almost innate and universal. But what do you do the day your needs are not being satisfied? How do you handle this? “You need a strong back to carry good days”, goes an old saying. But the strong back is even more useful for the rough days.

When the external framework changes, how do you then use the conceptual framework you bring along? To what extent are you able to adjust? There is a fine balance between being flexible and adjustable on the one hand and tagging along with people and surroundings on the other hand. You risk falling into the ditch on both sides. Either you become a grey mouse without a will of your own, views of your own or passion. Or you become the obstinate type whose life project is to always be of the contrary opinion. I suggest that the first ditch is more common in our society; we have lost our ability to provoke objections, to think for ourselves, and form opinions of our own.

Quite crucial for survival in situations one is unprepared for, is the ability to endure over time. To not give up on the first steep hill. Norwegian poet Henrik Wergeland wrote in his book *Nordmandens Katechisme* (The Catechism of the Norseman) some phrases that are very to the point about these qualities:

“A mind as fresh as the birch’s twig
Which bends, but will not break”

In other words, the ability to swing a little without breaking, without losing oneself.

A Lot Of Pain And A Lot Of Tears

These thoughts may be so obvious and common that they may seem banal. But I wished to present them before telling you about a woman

who grew up in a sect, a religious sect with its distinctive features and own rules for what was right and wrong, what belonged inside and what belonged outside. She also experienced sexual abuse. I stress that this is an individual case, and that no general conclusions should be made from this story. However, it is not unique. That is why it deserves your attention today.

I have told this woman that I am attending this conference, and she has given me the permission to tell her story.

When she was no longer a child, she started to develop contact with a world in which she realised that what she had learnt during childhood was not up to standard, or not sufficient to understand interaction between people. She experienced considerable anxiety fearing that she might do or say something wrong, fall outside, or enter the conflict area between her childhood environment and the surrounding culture. Her life became more and more dominated by anxiety. Additionally, she had vivid experiences of what I would define as manipulating delusions of damnation: "You are doomed if..." It could be related to anything from how she would dress to celebrating someone's birthday. It can be quite straining to carry such a conceptual framework when facing the world.

She also felt constrained by sanctions: "You belong with us. You have to do this and that. If not, this or that will happen".

She came to see me to get help, because she felt tormented. She had problems at her workplace, she expressed symptoms of anxiety, and she was tense and uneasy for most of the time. I listened to her story; we started talking.

My task as a therapist is to not influence the patient in a particular direction. The therapist should aspire to be abstinent, in the sense of holding his thoughts back, but at the same time trying to help the patients find the answers they had been longing for. In therapeutic jargon we talk about *the Socratic method*, which involves asking open questions to increase the patient's ability to find the answers on his or her own.

It was a challenge to follow her battle for some years. It gave me, as a therapist, resentment, some sort of anger over what she had experienced. I think it was important for her development and therapy that I was allowed to handle my own reactions to what I heard in such a way that I did not act as a judge to what she told

me and to what was her frame of reference. After all, this was her spiritual and "cultural" background. To make a radical and brutal rebellion with one's parents implies quite a lot for the person involved. One should never "cut deeper than one has tears", meaning: One rarely helps someone suffering by suggesting radical changes that may have consequences that the other person may not be able to handle. It was not *my* project that was to be carried out; it was her life project to obtain freedom in the sense of self-expression without harming anyone else. She could see that much of what she reacted to strongly, was so deeply innate in her that it led her to repeat patterns in her own interpersonal relations – for example with regards to sexuality.

It took a lot of time, a lot of pain and many tears, and I will not say that everything is fixed, that the healing process is over. But to enter the therapeutic room and follow this person gave me an understanding of the pain one suffers when leaving one's childhood environment and frame of reference. The cost is so high.

She entered an internal conflict between keeping her faith – her faith in God, her faith in Jesus – and at the same time disassociate herself from what she could see was unhealthy in the environment she had belonged to. Some things had to be discarded, some things had to be kept. It was difficult – both for her and for me.

Further Conversation And Debate

My primary wish with this presentation is to invite you to further conversation and debate where, in my opinion, it is important to avoid the simple "black and white" solutions, and to use our abilities to distinguish between the sick and the sound, with regards to religious communities. My daily work is at an institution where our special circumstances lead us to often meet these problems. We meet people who have experienced being subdued and harmed by a misperceived religious "straitjacket" and naturally are fighting to break loose. But we also meet people who have experienced that their faith in God has represented the main source to personal growth that they have been longing for.

It is my hope that this conference can be of help to many by putting these topics on the agenda.

Child psychologist Magne Raundalen

The Child Investigates – The Adults Are Research Supervisors

In his presentation, Magne Raundalen pointed out that children will not passively let themselves be filled with what the adults bring them. Children are researchers. It is important that the research environment is good. The research supervisors are the adults who surround the children – first of all the parents.

The most important and most critical focal point for this conference is the word *isolated*, said Magne Raundalen:

Since the post war era we have agreed that it is most important to satisfy children's needs. We have introduced the "child of needs" to an extreme degree. We have imagined that children are empty and that we should fill them up. We have perceived the child of needs as the passive child, the receptive child – not as the active child. We, child psychologists, have also been to blame.

The Investigative Child

But children are not passive; they investigate all the time. They investigate and conduct research; they study and systematise. This means that the adult role, the parental role, gets a different dimension. We are no longer waiters; we are research supervisors. We – the adults – are respon-

sible for the research environment. This is the drama in any child upbringing; it is also the drama in isolated communities.

Children investigate. But they do not know what is dangerous to examine. If they are ill, they conduct hospital research; if there is a war, they conduct war research. They conduct divorce research, they investigate mum and dad and God and Doomsday. In their research they have no one else to stick to than us. I repeat: we are research supervisors.

After a while they may learn that there are conflicting views on this research. Perhaps it is forbidden to conduct research in a particular area. But the children continue. They examine and investigate.

A preschool teacher once told me about a girl in preschool who told her that she now had a sweetheart.

"Is that so? What is his name?"

"Her name is Beate."

"But I thought that boys had girlfriends and girls had boyfriends?"

"Yes, that's true. But we have decided to become pikes."

As you understand: Children investigate quite complicated matters.

Children's research environment has been called "the little tradition". Initially it consists of parents, siblings, grandparents and neighbours. Later on it is expanded to kindergarten and school. In this research environment, children not only are supposed to develop their knowledge and competence, but also their views on life.

For researchers it is important to have a varied

and nuanced research environment. For the children, it is important that they become competent, constructive and healthy members of the greater tradition, the greater society. Their environment is their mini research environment for adult life. Of course it is important that we, as adults, make sure that their research environment is varied and nuanced.

The dramatic point in this respect is that while children conduct research and develop as open systems, it is important that the main central, the child's brain, is open. At the same time as children see, learn and experience, structures and formulas are stored in the brain. The nerve pathways that are used grow thick and strong; those that are under stimulated – to use that expression – become thin and weak. Different parts of the brain develop differently.

I consider what I have heard this afternoon. We have heard about repeated stimulations of fear, terror, Doomsday, traumatic experiences. This may lead to one part of the brain being over stimulated, overloaded. It leads to imbalance.

Traumatised children – those who have lasting traumas – have enormous problems mana-

ging and controlling their emotions. They become terrified; then they have panic attacks. They become angry, they become sad – then they crash. Physically they are not able to manage this part of their brain – because through their childhood it has been overloaded, over stimulated. There are actually too many nerve fibers there.

Then anxiety comes. They try to find words to describe what is happening, they try to find the right thoughts. Then it is good to have the support from a project like Go On. They should have received this help much earlier.

In The Risk Zone

It is also possible to indoctrinate the part of the brain that manages emotions, justifies attitudes and actions. The one-dimensional religious communities may trigger off and shape emotions that in the next phase – within an ideology – may be very dangerous. Those at risk are people who have experienced aggression, violence or trauma, those who have lived in fear and insecurity – and who have been exposed to high emo-



Child psychologist Magne Raundalen and Director of Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre Marianne Borgen.

tional tension – if at the same time they have had reduced cognitive control, a language based understanding of the situation they are in. These children are definitely at risk. We have harmed them.

The Road From A Painful Childhood To A Good Adult Life

Finnish author Ben Furman wrote the book “It is never too late to have a happy childhood”, published in Norway by Pedagogical Forum.

Furman put an advertisement in the newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet*, where he asked to get in touch with people who had had a hard, painful, traumatised childhood, in their own eyes, but who now felt that they lived a happy adult life. He received 300-400 letters the first week. The interest was huge: Where is the road from shadow to light? Where is the road from the sad childhood to the good adult life?

Furman systematised the responses, reflected upon them and wrote his book. He found three main factors on the road from the sad childhood to the happy adult life.

Factor number one: The good person. Someone they could talk to. Someone who knew about them, who understood how they felt. I see the Go On project as one such person for those who need it.

Factor number two: They had a very good language. They had written and written. They had written letters – letters they sent and letters they did not send – stories, diaries, romantic stories.

Factor number three: An understanding that the problem is the problem. You are not the problem.

Isolation Most Dangerous

Strong influence has always been in disrepute. In fact it has been missing in modern child upbringing.

It has been viewed as positive and natural that children choose the professions of their parents, even despite their parents’ warnings. Examples: political dynasties, medical families, artists, media dynasties and sports careers, such as the boxer Ole “Sandman”. Our starting point should therefore not be that it is wrong to influence someone to a religious faith. A religious faith may not be any worse than boxing.

This is why this debate is about something

bigger: It is about parents’ right – or lack of right – to do whatever they like with their children. This is what we need to debate – parents’ right to do what they like with their children. This applies to all parents, but it is extremely important that we have this debate about the group that is the focal point today.

The most dangerous aspect is that what is happening, is happening in isolation. No one outside really knows what is happening, no one is in the position to lend these exposed children a helping hand.



18 Stories

At the conference, texts narrated by actor Kim Haugen were played to the audience. The texts were based on stories told by the youths in the Go On project, as well as drawing on elements from contemporary literature. The conference organizers stressed that the stories were not unique. Several stories are included, and they have of course been made anonymous. However, this makes them no less true.

1.

I have sinned again. I have lied to both mum and dad. But I really wanted to play football with the others, even if there is a meeting tonight. I told them I was feeling nauseous after something I ate in home economics. What if the world comes to an end when they're at the meeting and I'm playing football? Then I can't hold on to mum or dad so that I too can come along to heaven. Then I will be stuck on Earth and be slaughtered just as all the others. Dear God, if you could wait to let the world come to an end, I will never ever lie or sneak off from meetings again.

2.

My name is Lars and I'm in first grade. In my class all the other kids but me have Pokemon cards. To swap Pokemon cards is the most popular game in the schoolyard. Today I got some cards from Siri in my class. When my little sister and me sat in the living room at home and played with the cards on the floor, dad came in and said in a furious voice:

"Where did you get these? If you don't throw them out at once, God will disappear from your hearts and the evil demons will enter instead!"

Then I thought in panic: Mum! Where is

mum? What will God do to me now? What will happen to my little sister? To Siri?

I only see black and can hear my heart pounding in my chest!

3.

When I was 12 years old I cut off my hair. I did most of it myself. A friend helped me cut the back. She cried all along and said the devil had got hold of me. I couldn't hear her, only commanded her to keep cutting. In the end she threw the scissors away and said that she didn't want to cut anymore because then the devil would take her too.

4.

My name is Kari. When I was 14 years old, I confessed to my teacher. I told her that I was sad, that I often had stomach pains and that I often had problems at school. Sometimes it is easier to talk to others than parents about such issues. I liked my teacher and thought that she would help me.

A few days later the pastor, who is the manager of both the school and the church, contacted my parents without me knowing it. They had a meeting where the pastor said he thought I was sick and possessed by the devil. The pastor said that the congregation should pray for me so that the evil spirits would leave me and then I would be healed.

Beforehand, mum had worried about me and talked to aunt Margot, her childhood friend. Aunt Margot said she believed that I was ill and should be treated at a hospital. Mum brought me to the hospital. They said that I was seriously ill. I received medical treatment and got better. But I refused to attend that school again. Mum and dad listened to me. Today, no one in my family is a member of that community.

5.

At the social security office they asked about my family and where I grew up. She asked and asked – and I told her. I didn't quite know what I had to tell them to get money for food and be

helped to find accommodation. When I told the social worker how disobedience was punished, she started crying. She said she had never heard about anything as cruel. There she sat – the professional helper – crying, when she was supposed to help me. I gave up and left. It would take a long time before I visited a public office again.

6.

When they told me that the application date for the autumn's school admissions was due in April, I thought they were joking. I have never considered plan anything ahead. We grew up believing that we were the chosen ones. We would be the new world leaders, after Judgment Day. I didn't believe that I would grow up to be an adult in this world. We, the chosen ones, would get to heaven and the others would perish in hell. There are no requirements for education to enter Heaven.

7.

Everyone wanted to hear about sexual abuse. But the mental abuse is much worse. It affects you far more.

8.

They said I was the child of the devil, and that they would save me from the torments of hell. Then they put me on a table and exorcised the devil out of me as they cried, wailed and waived their hands. In the beginning I was very scared. But after a while, I just left my body when they were doing it. I could float above them and watch. It was very strange to hang below the ceiling and watch myself. I almost felt like laughing.

9.

Dad said it was God's will what he was doing to me. And when something was God's will, it shouldn't hurt. But it did hurt a lot, and I always bled afterwards. Maybe God had forgotten me?

10.

Now Jon is gone. They say that he has been sent to a place where God helps the disobedient children to become obedient. But Jon is so scared of the dark. And he is used to mum comforting him at night. His mum and dad are serving the Lord in another country. And Jon misses them almost all the time. What if he never comes back to us?

11.

"You are quite special", mum told me. "You are not like the other children at school. You are chosen. That is why you should dress differently than the others. Remember that all the other children are lost."

But I so enjoyed being with Mette. She was nice and didn't find me weird for wearing long skirts. "People can wear whatever they like nowadays", she said.

But I can't tell mum that I like Mette, because she has short hair and wears trousers.

12.

Once a teacher asked me what we did at my house when we wanted to enjoy ourselves. And she wasn't being ironic. She was interested – in me! It was very strange, because mum and dad always told me that people on the outside never had any interest for anyone but themselves.

13.

While I was walking around picking birch twigs to make a cane, my head kind of filled with cotton. Sometimes I fainted. But no one knows this. Mum yelled at me for having taken so long. I told her that God had wanted me to pick the best birch twigs, and they grew on the other side of the forest. Mum and dad smiled when they heard my explanation, and I thought that maybe he wouldn't punish me after all.

14.

It was so embarrassing to have that sign placed around my neck: "I have been disobedient. Don't talk to me", it said. One time I "lost" the sign in the dishwasher. I left it there for a long time. When I took it out, the text was unreadable. But it didn't help. They only made a new one, and I had tape put over my mouth as an extra reminder that I should be obedient to God. It was a lot worse for Jacob. He had to wear the tape for several weeks. Well, not at night, and not when we were eating.

15.

Some ladies from the childcare were coming to see how we were doing. Then we were allowed to stay in the biggest room and have a look in all the books. We were never allowed to do this otherwise. And we knew that we should say that we were allowed to read anything we wanted,

and that no one but us lived in the house. It was both scary and fun to fool those ladies.

16.

When I was 15 years old, I managed to get hold of a loan card from the library. I hid the card inside the Bible. Mum and dad would never search in there. The guy I used to walk together with to collect money also knew, but never said anything. He also wanted to read the library books. But he didn't dare to. He was very nice, because he helped me go to the library without being caught.

17.

When I left the sect, I felt disloyal to my parents, and at the same time I felt isolated and suffered from a lack of social network. It was kind of in the air that God would punish those of us who fell away, and some of the dissenters solved this by denying all Christian dogma. Personally, I'm more ambivalent.

18.

I have one message to all of those who may be stuck alone in remote corners, everyone who

might feel alone – having rebelled against strict rules, regulations and routines, against unreasonable punishments for child pranks – one message to all of those who are afraid to leave a religious community which will disown them after they have left:

Don't give up hope! It may be tough, but it can also be wonderful outside! I have a very good life now. I took the courage and contacted my mother and father after years without contact. It went well. I even think they are proud that I have managed to get a nice apartment, a permanent job and a handsome boyfriend!

I am not lost, the way I was told I was going to be!



Pål Hilmar Sollie

The Time Of Truth

At the conference In Good Faith, Pål Hilmar Sollie read parts of his short story "The Time of Truth". Here is the whole story. Sollie himself has broken away from an isolated religious community.

I'm sitting here with the boxes. I'm on my knees looking through old stuff. Have almost forgotten about it all. Looking through these old cardboard boxes is like a time travel. This disordered time machine is bringing me back to every weird nook and cranny. I'm sitting here looking at old photos. Photos from 1974. Grandma, Stine Laika and me. Knitwear, bellbottoms and a solemn pose for the camera. I had a fringe, crookedly cut and big ears. Nine years and worrying about the end of the world and The Great Slaughter. The picture sends me on a further travel. Back to the December of 1974. I feel anxiety grabbing me.

I'm scared shitless of 1975. Only 23 days to go. Then it will be 1975. Then it will be 6000 years since Adam was created. God has rested long enough, and now he is angry. Mum is also scared nowadays. She has been particularly mad at my little brother and me. I'm going to grandma and granddad this Christmas. Not for Christmas Eve, of course. Then they will be celebrating Christmas, and that's not something one should do. I'll go there two days later. I usually look forward to the holidays at grandma's. But this time I'm nervous. I won't be at the same place as Dad when Armageddon arrives. I know that there won't be a chance to survive if I am in Sandefjord. I have to be close to Dad. Hold his hand. Because Dad will survive, and perhaps he will rescue me if I'm there with him. "I'll stay at home this Christmas", I tell mum. "No, Tom, that's not possible. We are going to Hamar to visit Gunnar and Sonja. They don't have any chil-

dren, so it will be very boring for you. And Gunnar isn't used to kids. No, you will go to Sandefjord with your brother." Can't tell mum why I don't want to leave. She'll only be more scared. Dad comes home and we have dinner. "Dad, can't I come with you to Hamar?" "Tom! We've already..." Mum is interrupted. "Why don't you want to go to grandma and granddad's?" "I want to stay with you. Please!" Dad looks strange. He knows how much I love my grandmother. "Grandma will be very sad. No, it is better you go to Sandefjord, kiddo." He strokes my cheek and smiles. "But Dad..." "Stop being so fussy!" Mum is almost hysterical. "Enough of this nonsense, son!" Dad is looking strict. I get up. Dad is already talking to mum about something else. I feel my head turning hot and cold at the same time. I walk backwards into the living room. No one sees me walking backwards. Mum and Dad are getting more distanced. I'm going to Sandefjord this Christmas.

I collect myself. Breathe heavily. I feel how some of the hopelessness lets go as I put the photo back in the box. Keep searching through my things. Below some videotapes from my time as a film collector, I find something that sends me on another journey. A picture from the football field. I'm standing holding a football, getting ready for kick off. I guess I must be 10-11, and football is my great passion. I never became a football star, but back then we were all Kevin Keegan and Peter Shilton. The junior football team in Risør was the best team of the district, and my dream was to play in the first eleven.

I play a lot of football. Every day at the field. *Kjempesteinsmyra* is the meeting place every day after school. I have joined the junior football team without Dad knowing. I asked him if I could, and he seemed okay with it until he realised that the training starts half an hour before the meetings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That means that I would lose two out of three meetings. Of course the answer was "No, honestly, Tom.

You understand this yourself." I do, but still. I love football, and I know I'm good enough for the team.

Today is Tuesday and I have the bag for the meeting full of football gear. The assembly room is only five minutes away from the football field. As the singing and prayers finish and the first student speech has started, I sneak out to the toilet. There is my bag, and I change from my suit to shorts and studs. The training is still on for another hour and a half, and I can stay there almost throughout.

The coach asks me why I'm late. I tell him I had the wrong time. He looks at me a bit fiercely, but throws a ball at me, and I'm a junior player. Time is flying. The ball is kicked and dribbled and I get a lot of praise from Karlsen, our coach. We finish at eight. I should have left earlier but Karlsen has held off choosing his team till now. I'm in the team on Saturday. As defence. The joy in my tummy is growing. I wish Dad could have seen me. He was one of the stars in Great Bergen in the 50s. I've seen pictures from when they won third league in 1957. But no, Dad wouldn't have been happy if he saw me now. Neither would Jehovah.

I quickly change, skip the shower and run back to the assembly hall. It's quarter past eight. If I'm out of luck, they've already finished. My plan is to sneak back into the toilet, and tell them that I've been sick. I reach the parking space. No one there. All the cars are neatly parked. I sneak into the hallway, and down the stairs to the toilet. I throw on my suit and sit down on the toilet seat. I can hear singing from the assembly room. That means it is soon over.

Five minutes later I hear someone entering. "Tom? Are you here?" "Yes, Dad." "Have you been on the toilet until now?" "Yes, I don't feel so well." "What's the matter?" "I've been throwing up." "Try to drink some water." His voice is calmer. "Yes." I tuck the football clothes well down into my bag.

On my way home from the meeting I have to act like I'm sick. At home I have to go straight to bed and have my temperature measured. I'm hot and sweaty. "37.9", says Dad. "You're staying home from school tomorrow."

These boxes really bring me back. A sore, warm feeling in my chest. I turn to look at a box from Banan-Mathisen. Here are some old clothes and toys. Something yellow is stuck on the



Pål Hilmar Sollie has written the short story "Tiden i sannheten" ("Time in Truth"). Sollie himself has broken away from an isolated religious community.

bottom. I pull out an old raincoat. A quite small yellow raincoat with plenty of writing on the back. KISS, DR. HOOK and SUPERTRAMP. I've always had a confused taste in music. On the bottom is a different writing: ELVIS IS THE KING. I remember that Kimmo nicked my pen and wrote his own hero at the bottom of my coat.

Kimmo is my best friend. He's from Finland and his father has seen Elvis Presley live. We spend a lot of time in his room listening to Elvis. Kimmo knows everything about Elvis.

It's always easy with Kimmo. He doesn't care that I can't celebrate Christmas and birthdays. Kimmo's mother has said that we can have hot dogs at their place in a week when I turn 12. That sounds safer than a cake. Kimmo's mum is called Maria and her eyes are kind. She always hums "Love Me Tender" and drinks beer. Kimmo has tasted beer several times. I don't quite dare

to. It doesn't smell very nice. Kimmo says he can make loud burps when he drinks beer.

Mum doesn't like Kimmo to come to my place. He's not allowed inside very often. Kimmo is used to that. Miss doesn't like him either. She says that he is rude and lazy. In the breaks I play football and don't see Kimmo very often. He says he's behind the shed smoking. Kimmo once showed me how to inhale the smoke from a cigarette. I've seen granddad do it, but Kimmo can blow smoke rings too.

Once Kimmo talked about running off to Finland. His father lives there. He has all of Elvis's LPs and drives a truck. But Kimmo stayed. He said his mother would be too lonely.

Kimmo is my best friend, but I haven't told anyone.

I put the coat back, and see a book lying in front of me. A thin book with a red cover and handwriting on the front. Report book for Tom Pedersen, it says. I flick through some pages. "Tom stayed at home yesterday, as he had the flu." "Tom didn't attend school for the last two classes as he had a tummy ache." All of them signed by Eva Pedersen. One of the messages seems familiar. A message from my teacher. Fifth grade. Home economics. We had had a test in home economics, and were about to cook fish. I hated fish and skipped the class. I got a report with me saying that fish is healthy and skipping class is unhealthy.

Two hours ago we were having dinner. Boiled cod. I hate boiled cod, but still have to eat it. To stuff yourself with food that makes you nauseous is not good for the mood, and when dinner was over it was time for punishment. Spanking at 6 pm. I had spat my food out, and refused to have more. I could choose between cold, chewed, boiled cod and hot, sore, red bum. I just could not choose the first option.

It just turned six o'clock. Usually time for kids' TV, but not today. Today it is me and Dad. Dad enters my room. We both know the procedure. We walk together into mum and Dad's bedroom. The birch cane is already on the bed. Big, wild and angry. I beg to be spared. I always do. "I promise to be good. I promise, Dad." Dad looks at me with angry eyes. Button down your trousers, Tom. Take them down, I said!" Dad is getting angry. I never manage to button them down myself. Dad always has to do it. And I struggle. I struggle against him. But he is too

strong, so my trousers always end up at my ankles. I am now in front of Dad by the bed. He is sitting, I am standing. "Now, pull down your underwear, Tom. Please don't make me have to punish you more than necessary." But no, I definitely can't do that. The nausea from dinner is getting stronger. I keep struggling.

I lose again. Ten seconds later I'm on top of Dad's lap, with my trousers and underwear well below my knees. I'm covering my bum with my hands. "I'll be good."

I feel a strong hand twisting my hands up to my back. Then the first spank. A spank from ten birch twigs. It spreads all over my bum. Another spank. And another. Dad is shouting: "When will you learn, Tom." The birch cane hitting like a machine gun over my bum and thighs. I'm jumping up and down on his lap. Trying to get my hands down to cover my bum, but Dad is holding me too hard. I'm crying and begging. "I'll be good, Dad." He spans me a few more times. Then... then it's silent. I am also crying silently. I know it is over for now. Dad lets me get up. I pull up my underwear and trousers as fast as I can. Dad is looking at me. "What do you say now, Tom?" I am empty. "Thanks, Dad. Thank you for teaching me to be a good witness." He gives me a long hug. I feel sick. Dad leaves the room, and turns around with the cane in his hand. "Let us hope that it will be long till next time." The door closes. I'm left in a feverish daze. My head and bum are glowing.

It's 6.15 pm. I have to get my knapsack from the kitchen. Mum and my little brother are sitting there. They know I have been spanked.

I'm sitting bent over one of the boxes. I throw my report book hard down into the box, and feel the anger pressing in my stomach. Why the hell do I make these journeys? What am I trying to prove to myself? I feel it is about time to finish for now. As I'm getting up, I see an old magazine on top of the box. An old edition of the Watchtower. Dated 1978. I pick it up and flick almost involuntarily through the pages. Some articles have been underlined. We studied quite a few editions of the Watchtower back then. One of the articles was about how important it is to have a pure language.

"Fy..."[1] It doesn't want to come out. "Fy Fa..." No, too scary. What if I can never return? When the words have been said, I'm doomed. "Black pine forest". I feel better. It doesn't have

quite the same sting, but is better than "gosh golly".

I'm sitting on the toilet. White, sterile walls and a scent of rosewood, which mum put in the pot because she insists a toilet should not be smelly. "Hmmm...", how weird to put nice smells where the waste comes out.

I really feel like swearing. Loudly, ugly and regularly. To stand in the middle of the schoolyard, shout loudly "Fy f... i h..." and pop out a cigarette, light it, have a few quick puffs, arrogantly flick off the ember and cough. I'm sitting here on the toilet knowing that if only I could say "Fy f..." loud and clear, my life would take a new turn.

Then it happens again, inside this tiny toilet, which is also my place of refuge.

The angst... Outside the door everything may have changed. If I turn in prayer to the evil spirits and ask to shake hands with the devil, he may be standing on the other side of the door when I go outside. Sweat trickles out on my forehead. I, who just three minutes ago thought about my Norwegian teacher and happily let my right hand touch the favourite parts of my body, now know that all that remains is a "Fy f..." and everything will be different. My sins have already been transferred to three sheets of toilet paper and flushed into the sewer. It is over and done with and... "Fy fa..." ... Oh, this is torment. I wonder if I will go insane if the devil is there on the other side of the door, waiting for me?

"Look into God's eyes and die", the psalms say. What about the devil's eyes...?

It should be sufficient to touch his hand. In a toilet without a safety net.

No, I have to say it. It is time to let the apple fall far from the trunk. "Fy f..."

"Fy fa..." "Fa..."

"Tom." Someone is knocking on the door. "Tom?" "Are you done yet? The Watchtower study class starts in fifteen minutes, you know." Dad sounds worried. I go for the door.

"Fy". I unlock the door and open it.

"Faen".

I get up. My legs have fallen asleep, and I have a prickly feeling down my legs. My time travel is done for now.

Next year, I think to myself.

Next year I'll give these boxes to a flea market.

Next year.



County Governor Ann-Kristin Olsen

We Must Fight The Abuse – Not The Religious Communities

County Governor Ann-Kristin Olsen believed that the most important point that the participants could take from the conference, was the idea that it is abuse of power and ill-treatment that should be attacked – not the religious communities. Olsen, a lawyer, has also worked for the European Council and Interpol.

This is a difficult field; a field in which we could all make mistakes despite good intentions. We are talking about parental responsibility. I hope we are not talking about parental power.

There are children who live isolated in the name of God. They live according to what their parents believe is a right to do whatever they like to their children.

There is a great need for definitions in this field. If we wish to conduct research or implement measures that can benefit children, it is crucial to be more precise in the use of the language and to reach some definitions.

Magne Raundalen spoke of the child as an investigator, of the child who takes in what surrounds it. I found this to be a significant statement. The child as an open system, taking in its surroundings. We – parents and local environment – are what the child absorbs. This gives us a great responsibility.

Formalities – a crucial starting point

Is this about control and power? Or is it about growth and choice? These are some crucial questions that we should dare to raise and dare to answer.

We have different ways of viewing reality. Some of these views are so diverging that the children who leave their community to tell us about their views of reality, are in fact not believed. This is something we have to take seriously. We have to believe these different views of reality of children from isolated religious communities.

We all have different faiths, but this is not what we are discussing today. Children are the focus. Essential questions are: How is child upbringing characterised by the dimensions of freedom and influence? How do we structure our child upbringing along these dimensions? What should our child upbringing contain? The contents and limitations of parental responsibility is something we should take from this conference.

The formalities – laws and rights – are important starting points. Children have rights, and parents have rights, as outlined in national laws, in the UN Child Convention and in the European Convention on Human Rights – to mention two important international instruments.

How can laws and conventions help us? They provide us with guidelines. They also provide us with limitations that restrict us – regardless of faith.

What should be the consequences for certain communities that violate the rights outlined in these laws and conventions?

We have heard that the Child Convention provides children with the right to be protected from physical and mental abuse. It also provides them the right to have their own views and to express them. Children have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. They have the right to privacy, and the right to education.

The Abuse – not the religious communities

Today we have heard examples that these rights have been systematically violated. When uniformity, not diversity, of information dominates, it goes against the Child Convention. When physical and mental punishment is carried out, it is against the law.

The most important point that we should take from this conference is that we have to attack the problem of abuse of power and ill treatment, not the religious communities as such. The community is the context where the abuse occurs, but if we wish to help the children, we have to focus on the abuse itself. If we are adamant about attacking the problem, we can avoid moral panic.

We also have to address more specific issues: Which requirements should be made for private religious schools? This is an arena with many layers – we need to address both the big moral questions and the smaller, practical issues.

Furthermore: How can those who have left isolated religious communities find new directions in life? Who should help them? Who should be there to be aware that they exist? Many are so desperate that they enter the open society with this attitude: Either I will manage or I won't. Within the last alternative lie terrible fates, which someone should take the responsibility to try to avoid.

Media Can Prevent

Media has not been mentioned. I wish to draw the attention to media as an important support. I actually believe that media can serve to prevent by creating more openness about the problems we are discussing today. Media creates the basis for most people's perceptions about society today. If media wishes to focus on a particular problem, much has been won. Obviously, this is a field where there is a risk of creating sensations, but the media coverage prior to this conference has been serious. We may draw a parallel to the

sexual abuse of children, where media has played a very positive role. Of course there have been some violations, but it is thanks to media that the consciousness in the Norwegian society is strong, and so many acknowledge that sexual abuse is happening.

Another important question is: How can we ensure knowledge? How can professionals in the field gain the knowledge to reveal, get hold of and help those who need it? We need to be systematic about building knowledge. We need more research.

Finally: We need to work towards a universal acceptance in society that being a parent involves responsibility, it does not put you in a position of power.



Ann-Kristin Olsen stressed that children have the right to be protected from physical and mental abuse. They have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. And they have the right to privacy and to education.

Lars Grip, Secretary of the Swedish Report, In Good Faith

Indifferent Silence After The Swedish Report

France, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria are restrictive and have adopted a firm attitude towards closed, religious communities, "sects". Italy, Denmark, Greece and England do not consider sects as a problem. Germany is somewhere in between.

These were some of the headlines in the presentation given by Lars Grip, Secretary of the Swedish public report *In Good Faith*.

It is my pleasure to lend the name of the Swedish report, "*In Good Faith*", to this conference. "*In Good Faith*" has a double meaning. To have a faith is a good thing, but it also means to be fooled. Then you are acting "in good faith", without knowing the underlying circumstances.

Report – then silence

It seems so long ago. In 1998 the report, on which I worked as the Secretary, was presented. After the report, there was a total silence. Not one of our suggestions was put into action. The reason may either be that we had said everything that was to be said or that there was no interest in the issue. Unfortunately, the latter seemed to be the case.

When we started our work, we realised how charged the topic was: Are you for or against? Everyone was pulling at us, wanting to throw suspicion on "the others", "the other side". It was hard to navigate and to maintain one's intellectual integrity.

Our mission was to report on whether people

who had left new-spiritual movements needed help. And if so, what society could do to help.

This is the politically correct way to express the issue. Of course there was also an interest in providing an overview of the extent of new-spiritual movements and whether they could be perceived as a threat to society or to democracy. It was particularly stressed that the report should not conflict with religious freedom.

We reached the conclusion that participation in so-called "sects" – a word we chose not to use – is a response to a search for meaning in a changeable and torn time. An increasing number of people do not believe in God in the traditional sense. A more privatised, experience-oriented spirituality seems to be on the increase, often related to nature and emotions. Reason: The political ideologies no longer have explanatory power, power of attraction. When the world is falling to pieces an ideological vacuum is created. In the narcissist society people are oriented towards individual and private experiences. The private experiences become more important than the institutionalised experiences and evaluations in traditional forms.

We found two tendencies that served as a reaction against the diversity of our time, which is so hard to grasp.

Tendency number one: The search for simple explanations that may instil a sense of security. Authoritarian movements would be attractive to these people. It provides a sense of security to strongly belong to a group with simple, distinct rules. A clear enemy picture and a strongly profiled explanation of how the world works, is a security against confusion and creates safety.

Tendency number two: An attraction towards the inner world, where the individualised spirituality – "I'm religious, but in my own way" –

provides trust based on inner experiences.

With regards to spiritual movements, one may recognise an escape from freedom and from democratic ways to deal with life.

Centre Of Knowledge For Philosophy Of Life And Faith Issues

The cover of our report "In Good Faith" is illustrated with August Strindberg's painting "Staden" (The City). In a changeable landscape the city glitters far away, golden, alluring.

We produced a complete list of all the religious communities in the country. We certainly did not wish to treat some communities as more important than others. They were all on the same list, ranging from the Catholic Church to Hare Krishna. 120 in total. If one is to define the 'new-religious movement' as communities established within the last ten years, the number of members is 50,000-60,000 in Sweden. If one is to include new age movements and communities involved in psychological techniques, the number is far higher.

We have the right to believe whatever we want. Society and the state have no right to say what is the right or wrong faith; this is the core of the concept of religious freedom.

We concluded that the number of people who experience a personal crisis after having left a closed religious community is one hundred per year. One hundred persons seek help to handle a crisis directly related to having left a community of this kind. There is no need for a treatment centre. However, we suggested the establishment of a Centre of Knowledge for Philosophy of Life and Faith Issues, since lack of communication often leads to misconceptions and fear of sects. A meeting place for believers and non-believers, if you like – to reduce conflicts, tensions and myths. We wanted education, conferences and training on how to deal with moral panic. As this is an area so polarised and filled with emotions, either you are for or against, it is important to have knowledge without prejudice and a dialogue to avoid paranoid misperceptions from both sides. Sometimes the so-called anti-cult-movement shares the characteristics of the so-called sects. They see enemies behind every bush.

The task of this knowledge centre would also be to stimulate research in the area.



Lars Grip, Secretary of the Swedish Report, "In Good Faith"

Children who live in closed communities have the same rights as all other children. At the same time, they should not be stigmatised by society. The outside world should be respectful and informative about its attitudes. Teachers and other professionals working with children should be offered education in these issues. It is the duty of the social services to disclose whether corporal punishment and abuse of children occurs in these closed communities. More insight into Christian private schools must also be gained.

We are allowed to believe whatever we want. We are allowed to believe in a society without democracy. But freedom of religion has its limitations. It should not conflict with democratic rights and freedom, and one cannot break the law. Neither religious movements nor anyone

else can do this. Our conclusion was that the law is sufficient, but it does not offer sufficient protection against what we define as improper influence or manipulation.

Other Countries

We also looked at the situation in some of the other European countries. Here is a summary:

France: Takes a firm stance. A report from 1996, *Les Sectes en France*, defined sects, and was built on the *Direction des Renseignements généraux*, an organisation within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Factors described as “dangerous” are mental destabilisation, economic demands, to live isolated outside society, anti-social doctrines, etc. One believes that there are 180 such communities and at least 800 satellite groups. In total, these sects have 160,000 members. According to the report they should not be treated as religions, as they have no religious objectives. Already in 1985 Alain Vivain edited, on mission from the Prime Minister, *Les sectes en France*. This work led to the establishment of a permanent interdepartmental committee, functioning as a supervisory body. It was believed that there was no need for new laws. However, there was a need for more information in schools. A state funded campaign was implemented, and public employees were trained in the issues.

Belgium: The Belgium parliament presented a report in 1996, quite similar to the French. It listed 180 dangerous sects, as in France. The Minister of Social Affairs received harsh criticism for not having revealed earlier how dangerous the sects were. In May 1999, an “observatory” was established.

Switzerland: In 1997, the Canton in Geneva published an anthology by eight Swiss experts. Here, too, a list was made public. The law was regarded as not being an obstacle to act against the sects. Public information was produced and an independent body – *Inforsekta* – was established, aiming to keep an eye on what was going on.

In all the three countries – France, Belgium and Switzerland – the public debate was intensive.

Austria: The Ministry for Youths and Families published the brochure “*Sekten – Wissen Schulz*” on how to protect one's children from sects. It led to the Ministry receiving 2000 telep-

hone queries every day. The Ministry for Education distributed the school brochure “*Community Can Be Dangerous*”. Here it is estimated that 100,000-150,000 people are involved in sects.

Italy: Very liberal. A police report that was meant to be confidential, was leaked to the press. The conclusion of the report was that not one lawsuit against a sect had been made. Recently another very liberal law on religious activities was passed.

Germany: In 1998, a report was published with the underlying statement that sects are dangerous. They may lead to family problems and frauds. The sects' judgments deviate from society's judgments and their lifestyle is very different. However, it is not possible to know about the extent of violations of laws inside the sects, especially not in Germany, since there are so many “psycho-groups” offering various therapeutic techniques for individual development. The “psyche market” in Germany has a turnover of approximately 18 billion Deutsche Mark. Forty esoteric magazines have a total of 2.9 million issues printed. According to a commission, there is no brainwash. Psychological influence cannot be reduced to simple causal explanations. The following groups are considered to be problematic: Ananda Marga, Sant Thakar Singh, Verein zur Förderung der psychologischen Menschenkenntnis (VPM), the Scientologists, ISKON, Moon, Jehovah's Witnesses and Children of God. The conclusion is that they pose no threat to society. The Scientologists are not considered a religious movement, among others because they charge a fee for their doctrine. They are subject to particular observation by the state. If a community is regarded as being dangerous to society, as a threat to democracy or the constitution, there is a special law – *Verfassungs-Schultz* – that can be used to stop their activities. The report suggested public funding of an organisation that would improve the quality of all counselling that exists in Germany. This organisation could initiate research and educate public employees. The report also suggested passing a law that would introduce a licence of psychotherapeutic quality, directed against quackery and new age. Furthermore, new legislation was suggested that would protect consumers' interests within therapy and counselling. The Green Party was opposed to the other parties in the commission. They argued that empirical facts were lacking,

that there were no good definitions and that this was a case of moral panic.

England: There is no strong anti-cult-movement, and the government has shown little interest in these issues.

Denmark: A very liberal tradition. This is a reason why the Scientologists have their European headquarter there. There is also the Dialogcentret, an anti-cult movement with a Christian basis, but it is on the decline.

In other words: France, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria are restrictive and have adopted a firm attitude. Italy, Denmark, Greece and England do not consider the sects as a problem. Germany is somewhere in between.

In the **United States**, there is AFF – American Family Foundation – with Michael Langone as the driving force in Naples, Florida. In the USA, the First Amendment of the Constitution is rock solid, so all kind of movements can operate freely. Many Scientologists probably work in the state administration. However, a depolarisation has happened over the last years. The “anti-cult movement”, AFF and new religious movements visit each other’s conferences and a reciprocal understanding is developing. Hare Krishna and other communities have admitted to infringements, and have promised to improve.

The **EU** passed a resolution on 22 May 1984

and another on 29 February 1996. The word “sect” is used without being charged with a certain meaning. Member countries are encouraged to not pass any measures against these groupings – because of the freedom of religion. New religious movements are not considered a threat to democracy. Therefore no special assignments have been delegated to the joint police office, Europol.

Norway: acts instead of talks

It is good that this project has been initiated in Norway. It is good that you are addressing the concrete reality instead of producing reports. You are doing something instead of just talking. Good luck with the Go On project.



Per Kornhall, defector from Word of Life

Defected After 17 Years – and was free

“Some school subjects are taught far below standard. In my subject – biology – this is the case, for instance, for knowledge about evolution, the age of the Earth, and how species are related. This is knowledge that any biologist possesses, but which is totally lacking in a school like Word of Life, where it is believed that the First Book of Moses gives an actual description of the development of the Earth”, said Per Kornhall, who left his job as a teacher after 17 years.

I am a botanist; I conduct research on flowers. In other words, I am not an expert on psychiatry or child psychology. I am also educated as a teacher. But the reason why I am here today is that I had been a teacher at the Word of Life school for 17 years. I left the Word of Life High School in February of this year (2001). Afterwards I have talked publicly about my experiences in various circumstances. I wish that both those who are left at the School of Life and people on the outside should see that there is someone who dares to tell what is going on. There are so many who do not dare.

17 Years – and then free

I stayed in Word of Life for 17 years before I defected. “17 years – and then free”, I like to say.

The last period I stayed there appeared very strange to me. Everyone around me was thinking

alike, believing alike, and saying the same things. Everyone was saying: “This is so marvelous”. At the same time, some were pushed out because they married against the pastor’s command. Some of them were my friends, but I was not allowed to attend their wedding; I was not allowed to have contact with them. A feeling of dissatisfaction was growing inside me.

It reached a point where I decided that I could not accept this. I decided to leave the organisation. It was not until then that I dared read what other defectors had written.

To oppose an organisation like Word of Life has its price. People have come to me and called me a liar; people have telephoned me and said that I am possessed by demons, that I am guilty of deadly sins, that I am driven by envy and hatred, and so on. A strong control has been exercised. Or an attempt to control. Even in my very close circle of people I have met resistance: My wife wants to “protect” my children from me, and my children believe that I am a tool of the devil, trying to remove them from the true faith.

The Un-Christian Dogma Of Evolution

Some areas of the school I worked at – Word of Life High School – functioned very well. The students receive good education in Maths, Swedish, and so on. A conscious choice has been made to create an old-fashioned cram school. The students meet tough requirements. In several subjects the results are very good. Perhaps this is at the cost of the children’s recreational activities, because they are required to do a lot of homework.

But some subjects are taught far below standard. In my subject – biology – this is the case,

for instance, for knowledge about evolution, the age of the Earth, and how species are related. This is knowledge that any biologist possesses, but which is totally lacking in a school like Word of Life, where it is believed that the First Book of Moses gives an actual description of the development of the Earth.

Sexual knowledge is also very inadequate in this school. Young people are not supposed to have a sexual life before they marry. So why should they receive any sexual education?

At times these pages have been glued together. This does not happen any longer. One is more aware of what society demands. Still, you meet students who say that they never received any sexual education. The school management insists that they have a very good sexual education.

Furthermore, the school displays a leader worship that contributed to my understanding that I had to leave. For example, I remember when "Pastor Ulf" – Ulf Ekman – turned 50 years old. The whole school was on parade and saw him land in a helicopter. Tribute songs were sung. The whole celebration was arranged as a worshipping that disgusted me.

The religion is organised as a religion of obedience, where the Christian material stresses that you should obey your parents, teachers and other caretakers. If you do not do what you are told, there is the threat that you will not receive blessings.

Prayer meetings – with speaking in tongues – are compulsory. At the front is one person speaking in tongues and raising his hands, followed by 14-15 year old students. There is absolutely no voluntariness involved. This is how you are expected to behave!

When students came to my classes, they insisted that they had been taught that everything related to evolution was wrong. They believed that when scientists talked about evolution, they were either stupid or anti-Christian. They thought that it was against Christianity to believe in evolution. They believed that such ideas were sinful, evil. I had to spend a lot of time explaining why scientists talk about evolution. I had to explain that when my department at Uppsala University was called the Department of Evolutionary Biology, it was because it was such an important field. I had to spend a lot more time explaining these things compared to colleagues in



Per Kornhall was a teacher at the Word of Life High School in Uppsala for 17 years. He is currently a doctoral student in Systematic Botany at the University of Uppsala.

other schools. Class after class after class I tried to explain what was behind the theory of evolution. I said that whatever we think or believe, at least we should acknowledge that these scientists are not stupid.

The last years I was happy to experience that my students understood that they were allowed to think; that it was okay to be both a Christian and to think. I am still a Christian myself.

The Double Game Of The Organisation

The organisation, Word of Life, and its schools view society as an external, evil power. But it is playing a double game.

To the newspaper *Uppsala Nye Tidning*,

Word of Life's School Manager Maj-Kristin Svedlund said on 29 March 2001: "The Christian faith is not opposed to science, on the contrary. The Christian faith is pro truth, and science is about reaching truths."

To her own, she said, in Magazinet on 5 April 2001: "There is no doubt that these theories are strongly secularised and sometimes fanatically anti-Christian."

At a school conference she said: "What is their lie? The theory of development. Children are taught these theories, so that when they hear the truth, that the Bible is the truth, and when they hear the word of God, they have been impregnated with lies, so that there is no room for the word of God."

In other words: One message to the outside, another inwards.

I will also include a quote from the homepage of Krister Renard, who teaches Physics at the Word of Life High School: "So let us Christians redirect our cannons a bit and start shooting at the reason itself for atheism – evolution!"

When Uppsala Nya Tidning cited School Manager Maj-Kristin Svedlund, they also interviewed some students. Their statements said a lot about what they had been taught and the attitudes they had gained.

"It is quite strange that grown-up men try to counter argue the Bible to prove that we are related to the apes," said one student.

Deviant Thoughts Come From The Devil

This was a background of the school. What about the organisation?

It is authoritarian. The absolute authority lies with Ulf Ekman. His word comes from God. The organisation and its members are isolated from the rest of the world. All criticism is suppressed. There is no room for nuances. Either you are with or against us; it is all or nothing. Mind control also extends to children and young people.

Two quotes. First pastor Ulf:

"I heard about a man who fought against us a lot and who later died. Yes, it has happened to several, some have died with a thunderous downfall. Yes, it's true. Some of those who have preached against us just went and died. It's not funny! It is better to preach for God than against him, you know."

Did Not Agree

Present at the conference were parents and students from Word of Life High School in Uppsala. They stood up and expressed that they did not agree with the reality picture presented by Per Kornhall. They believed that the students are taught to be independent people who can think for themselves.

School Manager Maj-Kristin Svedlund:

"It is apparent that there is a completely different spirit that inhabits the people that govern society, the school sector and the authorities. ...This system is so essentially different from God and the Holy Spirit."

Socialism is a demon, according to Ulf Ekman. Here is a quote from 1988:

"Socialism is not an ideology. It is a mind power. It is a godless, atheistic, proud, dominant mind power and its influence must be broken in the mind world."

The absolute demands made by Word of Life lead children and young people to be imprinted with certain understandings tied up to their conscience. Some thoughts they are not allowed to think. Children are made to believe that if they think differently, they are not Christians! The result is children and young people who cannot think critically, who are convinced that "wrong" thoughts come from the devil, who do not understand the nature of democracy, who do not understand the value of debate, who do not appreciate the value of exchange of opinions, who believe that everything is either black or white.

See this in the light of children's rights: The right for information, the right to freedom of religion, the right to have the same education as other children, the right to make one's own choices.

Ban Or Not?

Should these schools be banned? Made illegal?

The answer is the result of a balancing between children's rights and the risk that the organisation develops.

Perhaps they should be legal, but under the

influence of the authorities. Then they are compelled to consider the rules in force. Then they would become more normal. This would be the positive effect. The negative effect is that they control the children. This school is one of the largest schools in Uppsala. Naturally, it would not have been if the restrictions had been stronger.

In other words it is a balancing act. I do not wish to say whether the school should be ban-

ned or not. What I wish to say is that society and authorities must be aware of the existence of these sects. School authorities must have tools strong enough so that if the schools are not permitted to run, the authorities should take over. They must be allowed to conduct in-depth interviews with the students, and they must supervise and control that the schools meet the requirements that society is entitled to make.



Keywords From The Buzz Groups

A number of “buzz groups” were put together on the conference. People with different backgrounds discussed the topics of the day and took notes on paper that was later put up on the wall. The keywords were just that – keywords. No underlying resonations or persistent argumentation – although the groups had both resonated and argued internally beforehand. The keywords could perhaps release ideas in those who read them. Here are the keywords presented by the buzz groups to the conference.

Double standards in relation to the “internal” Norwegian conditions versus other cultures,

Research - what happens to the children in these communities?

Better control with private schools!

Children/youths need to know who they can talk to - dissemination of information,

Why do we violate?

What kind of support network will be there after the Go On project? What happens next?

Reactions from the religious communities - how to create a dialogue?

How to adjust our help according to the various communities - varying degrees of isolation,

Avoid stigmatisation - more openness and dialogue,

Attack the problem (abuse of power, mistreatment) rather than the religious community,

Openness both ways - one group has to make the first move,

These children are “invisible” to public health nurses and teachers,



After a series of presentations and debate in the plenary session, the participants were divided into "buzz groups". Here they got to discuss the issues with people from various backgrounds.

Home education - is it up to standard? Does it provide unbalanced knowledge? Is it controllable?

To be exposed to ideas about Doomsday from a young age creates anxiety and depression in many areas later in life.

Lack of network outside one's original "society/culture" - a network established in your 20s is not sufficient.

Parental rights: Who decides in which environment? Under which influence should children grow up in a democracy?

The UN Child Convention is very important.

Who is to define what is right and wrong as long as one stays on the right side of the law?

Important for children: Good role models. Basis: love, not fear.

To help those who wish for or need help, without creating problems for those who function well in the religious communities.

General information that reaches everyone - for instance through school.

Prevention instead of repair.

To establish relations of trust, making it is possible to guide attitudes and behaviour that is not harmful to children.

Information about isolated religious communities and relief measures must reach the wider society, schools and the psychiatry. Closure is crucial.

Focus on critical and creative thinking.

More resources to improve children's growing up conditions.

Increased consciousness on children's rights.

Do not confuse the debate for/against religious communities with initiatives to help individuals.

Lack of knowledge within professional environments and education.

Information and openness.



The discussions of the buzz groups were summed up on large pieces of paper that were put up on the walls in the conference assembly room.

Making visible.

A neutral interest organisation.

The border between sound and unsound - society's need for insight.

What is about religion and what is about interpersonal relations?

How can we use individual experiences as an opening gate to a constructive discussion on the religious communities' practice of their own dogmas?

Work towards openness by using the legislation and knowledge about children.

Increase the competence in the childcare on how to help children and young people out of the closed communities and/or prevent neglect of care.

Increase the knowledge about sound and unsound environments in general.



Ellen Kartnes and Dag Hareide interviewed three young people who had broken with isolated religious communities. In the picture one of them is telling about the difficult road to the outside world.

How to reduce the loss; adequate therapy, to be believed, centre for defectors, help to break the isolation (networks).

Should people belonging to isolated religious communities be allowed to adopt traumatised children?

More research,

Increased competence in schools and support services,

An interest organisation where they can get practical help and meet others in the same situation,

Establish a centre of competence,

Improved supervision with publicly approved private schools; Supervision so that the education is in accordance with the UN Child Convention and the curriculum,

Isolation, manipulation and being denied to think for yourself does not only imply loss of rights but also destroys life skills and life abilities,

Being brought up to submission vs. living in freedom and diversity.

Need for increased competence, e.g. at the social security offices and public health centres and in the school sector.

Parallels to other groups, e.g. work with refugees.

Must not throw the baby out with the dishwater.

Increased knowledge and competence about religious groups and their effect on children; what is healthy and what is harmful?

Clarify the relation between the child's and the parents' rights.

More resources to schools and the public sector.

Get more personal stories out in the open.

Focus on defectors with small children. What are their needs? What can the public support services do?



Sylvia Hansen is a defector from an isolated religious community. At the conference she talked about her experiences.

Creative expressions on children's premises - e.g. music, dance.

The wider society - are the priests here?

Research - first and foremost on the leaders.

How do we reach the child?

Be aware of the risk of creating negative stereotypes.

Do not give public funding without requirements of insight and supervision.

Guidance services - who can children, teachers and other care persons turn to?

Who decides whether to bring the problem further - and if so, where?

Preventive work: How to create a dialogue on children's development? How to develop openness in "theological" environments about these issues? How to expand support services to meet these issues?

Development of and imparting knowledge: How to integrate knowledge about these issues in the education of professionals working with children? How to build systematic knowledge about what is caused by negative features in the religious communities and what is caused by the individual family?

Network - how to continue Go On?

We should dare to call a spade a spade, and not hide behind misconceived tolerance.

Closed environments - also non-religious - lose the right to social interaction; children are brought up in a way that prevents creativity and display of their abilities and instead cultivates angst for behavioural consequences (fear of hell/Doomsday).

Perspectives on human life - knowledge about children's rights out to the people!

Critical book reviews of sects' textbooks for children and youths.

Children's rights to not have a religion.



Mayor Øystein Olsen from Soknedal spoke of the experiences of a local community and its politicians to have both a private and a public school in the municipality. In the background: Ellen Kartnes.

Marianne Borgen, Director of Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre

Knowledge That Obliges

Marianne Borgen, Director of Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre, summed up the conference by saying that it is important to be able to – and have the courage to – see the invisible children. At the conference, many people called for research and new knowledge. “This is important”, said Marianne Borgen. But at the same time: The knowledge that we already have obliges us: “It obliges all of us who have been here today. We have an ethical and moral obligation to dare engaging in this debate. We must have the courage to speak about children’s rights and children’s situations in light of what many will perceive as parents’ undeniable rights.”

Save the Children works to make the invisible children visible. This project falls within this type of work.

Firstly, I would like to thank the youths who initiated this project. Without their courage, none of us would sit here today. I wish to thank you for sharing your personal stories with us, stories that have given us new knowledge and new insight. I think many of us – not least after what we have heard today – appreciate the costs of coming forward and speak publicly about one’s story. Thanks also to Dag Hareide, who guided these youths through a difficult bureaucratic and departmental jungle and who advised them to contact Save the Children Norway’s Child Rights Centre.

Save the Children’s focus in this landscape has been children and the violation of children’s rights. This does not mean that adults are not struggling. Adults with problems should also be taken seriously, but the main focus for Save the Children is children and the violation of their rights.

Supervision By The Blue Light Method

This conference has showed that we have many great challenges to work on for the time to come. We have heard a number of examples of grave and serious offences and violations of children’s rights – violations of the freedom of thought, freedom of belief and freedom of speech. Not least should we question the way we administer the supervision of private schools. Or put differently: the way we do not conduct supervision.

According to the information Save the Children Norway holds of supervision of private schools, it is conducted according to the “blue light method”. This means that supervision is conducted only when someone gives notice or calls out about a problem. This is a supervision methodology I believe that many – even those who work for the offices of education – admit is not sufficient. This is an issue we have to work on.

Children with problems need to find their way around in the wider society – no matter what the cause of their problem. They have the right for help. It is an obligation of the wider society to provide the necessary help, treatment and care when children experience problems or suffer injury, no matter what the causes are. This also applies to the children included in this project.

Save the Children Norway has a humble attitude in the landscape in which we are presently moving, a landscape where strong emotions pre-

vail. This is a minefield. Perhaps we could say that Save the Children's international work on mine clearance would be useful here.

We see with great clarity that we are touching upon an area of tension between what parents can do with their children and what children's rights are. Magne Raundalen earlier said that our society wants parents to make restrictions and guide their children, but the question is where these restrictions go. And who is to decide where they go?

This is a tremendously difficult debate, which many of us will need to make in the time to come.

Knowledge That Obliges

It has also been pointed out that we need more knowledge and more research; we need clearer definitions. A clearer understanding of what we are discussing will also provide a better basis for a better dialogue and conversation about these issues.

But this is knowledge that obliges. It obliges all of us who have been here today. We have an ethical and moral obligation to dare engaging in this debate. We must have the courage to speak about children's rights and children's situation in light of what many will perceive as parents' undeniable rights.

We are many here today who have felt humble in regards to the information and the personal experiences that have been shared with us. It is a great challenge to reach the children that need help and assistance. It is important that we are able to – and have the courage to – see the invisible children.

We need knowledge. But we also know enough to be able to act. Everyone who is here today, everyone who meets children, or who works with children, everyone who is a professional on children's issues, everyone who is a parent, grandparent, relative, friend, neighbour – everyone of us has a special obligation to see the children, to listen and take their stories seriously.

Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre has a particular responsibility to follow up the knowledge we have been presented with today. We owe it to the youths who have carried the burden of coming forward and sharing their stories with us, with the intention of creating a better situation for all.



Marianne Borgen, Director of Save the Children Norway's Child Rights Centre.

The Child's Name Is "Today"

It has been important for this conference that so many have come here with so many different experiences – maybe also with different objectives. I believe that the diversity represented in this audience is a good sign that we are open and willing to take the debate further here in Norway.

Save the Children Norway works both nationally and internationally. I believe that some of

the experiences that we have, also internationally – about believing in dialogue, believing in diplomacy, in openness – is a useful basis to continue our work from, when all of us in different ways will use the knowledge from this conference to shed light on dilemmas and issues in the years to come.

Finally: Many of you probably remember Pål André Grindrud, who some years ago gave a face to children growing up in families with drug and alcohol abuse. He said:

"Childhood lasts all through life."

In many ways one could say that childhood not only lasts all through life, it lasts through generations. Nobel prize winner Gabriela Mistral expressed it in a poem:

*We are guilty of many errors
And faults
But our worst crime is
Abandoning the children,
Neglecting the fountain of life.
Many things we need can wait
The child cannot
Right now is the time
Bones are being formed,
Blood is being made,
Senses are being developed.
To the child we cannot answer "Tomorrow".
The child's name is "Today".*

*Pianist Tor Espen Aspaas was responsible for
the artistic component of the conference.*

IN GOOD FAITH



EPILOGUE

In the autumn of 1999, a group of young people met with Save the Children Norway and told us about their experiences and wishes. This was the beginning of the Go On project. The youths had taken a giant step. We first realised how big a step this was after the project had been ongoing for some time, and we had made contact with several other young people from various religious communities. For them, making contact with people in the secular world ('the greater society') was neither natural nor simple. Most of them had been warned about the greater society throughout their childhood. Some had also been threatened with horrible punishments that would be inflicted on them if they had contact with people outside their own religious community. Save the Children hired people in the project with broad experience from childcare, social services and the judicial field. This was an important condition for creating trust and security for the youths involved in the project.

In retrospect one may wonder why so many dared to contact Save the Children, despite these threats. The main reason is probably that the project all along has maintained a rights perspective, and has been resource and future oriented. Those we have been in contact with have mainly been concerned with starting an education, finding a job, a place to live, receiving adequate medical aid, getting help to understand and manage the parental role, and getting guidance in how to relate to the various public bodies, neighbours and people in general. Many have expressed the need for a reference book where they may receive advice, for example, on what, and how much, they should reveal about themselves in different circumstances.

Since the autumn of 1999, project staff in Save the Children Norway has been participants as well as contributors to a range of conferences that in various ways have shed light upon the topics of faith and freedom of religion. Some of the youths from the group that made the initiative in 1999 have also participated at the conferences. There have been seminars and meetings with

different organizers in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Spain, England and USA. In most of these conferences the focus has been on adults. On the few occasions where children's situation has been on the agenda, discussion has revolved around freedom of religion and parents' right to raise their children in their own faith.

However, on the occasions where we have had the opportunity to present our project, conference participants have had a positive attitude to Go On's experiences, in particular the project's clear focus on rights. Children's rights to freedom of speech, freedom of thought and freedom of religion have been put on the agenda within environments where these issues have not previously been raised. Many have expressed the wish to start up similar projects in their respective countries.

Several meetings have been arranged to create dialogue between various religious communities and at these meetings, leaders of some of the isolated communities have been present and active. This had been useful and very important for the project.

Enquiries about the project have come from all over the country, and a few requests have come from Sweden, Canada and England. However, most enquiries have come from the Eastern part of Norway where most of the isolated religious communities have their base.

Children's conditions in isolated religious communities are truly like a closed landscape. Through contact with professionals in different areas of society we have repeatedly had this impression reinforced. Religious and faith issues should not be touched, and far less problematised by the health services or other public support services. Issues related to faith are regarded as far more private than most other personal issues.

International and national literature in the area of religion and faith only very rarely touch upon children's conditions. With regards to children's rights to the freedom of thought and freedom of religion, we have not found any reflections around the topic. The issue here is children's

right to form opinions and decide about faith issues on their own. But it is also a question of which of the parents' faith that should "matter" in cases where the parents belong to different religious communities.

Those who have made contact with the project have told us appalling stories from their own childhood, when physical and psychological forms of punishment were put into system. But they have also told us about good experiences. And quite exceptionally do they carry remorse for their parents, who in many cases still belong to the religious communities, for their negative experiences. However, many wish for revenge of the leaders of the religious communities.

Physical and humiliating punishment are among the serious violations of children's rights in these communities – however, a great number of people identify the prohibition against having one's own thoughts, and the practicing of mind-stopping rituals, as the worst violations during their childhood. The project has thus revealed examples of gross and repeated violations of children's rights to freedom of thought, belief and speech, to an extent that has not previously been revealed in Norway, or in any literature that we know of.

The experiences from the pilot project put responsibility on all of us who have participated. For Save the Children Norway, it has therefore been important to disseminate this knowledge to others, to stimulate other organisations and countries to develop similar projects. We have gained knowledge in an area in which we previously knew nothing about, and no one else had systematic knowledge about. It is therefore essential that the pilot project be followed up. This has been a pilot project that has given us new and important knowledge, but there is a need for more knowledge about children in isolated communities. We need more systematised research in this field both in Norway and other countries.

Save the Children Norway wishes to follow up the experiences from the project by initiating a dialogue with the Parliament, intending to stimulate more research in the area and have an assessment of whether a national centre of competence in this field should be established.

Project Manager

Turid Berger

February 2003

[1] Translator's note: In the Norwegian language, the strongest and most common swear words refer to the devil. "Fy faen i helvete" literally means "The devil in Hell"



Besøksadresse:
Hammersborg Torg 3, 0179 Oslo
Postadresse: Postboks 6902,
St. Olavs plass, 0130 Oslo

Telefon: 22 99 09 00
Telefaks: 22 20 17 66
Postgiro: 0803 5000187

Bankgiro: 8200.01.60756
Organisasjonsnr.: 941 296 459
post@reddbarna.no
www.reddbarna.no