

Bicycles for “People in Need”

As the parish council was formed in 2014, one of the wishes expressed was to have a project group which, within the broader area of “people in need” would give special attention to refugees. The small project group lead by Deacon Christian Eilers started work in 2015. To begin with, the group took some information from the SKM (Catholic Association for Social Services in Lingen) which is working with migrants and people in different types of urgent need in the town of Lingen, as to what and how our pastoral unit could do to help.

The SKM members informed us about their work and told us in which areas some forms of social services were of little or no relevance. “The families with school age children are particularly burdened because the school supplies are very expensive and are only insufficiently taken into account in the social services provided”, Anne Lüdjohann from SKM told us.

Consequently, the project group took over an action which had already been started by the First Communion children from Maria Königin parish: “we collect school supplies for refugees”. In different locations (parish churches, schools and shops) within the pastoral unit area collection bins were set out. Countless pencils and pens, notebooks, bags, backpacks and school bags were collected in the space of a few weeks. In March 2015, the collected school material was given to SKM. During this period, the next project “Bikes for People in Need” was also born. The so-called “wave of refugees” which arrived in Lingen as well, posed new challenges for the people coming into the mostly rural Ems area. The absolutely sensible decision to provide decentralized accommodation to these people in housing units located in the villages also resulted in the necessity to resolve the issue of transportation to schools, shopping and authorities.

“Let’s make the people mobile” was the idea of the project group “Giving People a Home” (this is the current name of the group). Because there are enough unused bicycles. In a first collection held on Saturday, April 25th 2015, in two collection points on the pastoral unit’s territory, almost 200 bicycles were collected. With the help of the Catholic Rural Youth Movement and other volunteer helpers, the bikes were catalogued and then stored centrally at the Maria Königin Church. Through a cooperation of two schools (Gesamtschule Emsland and Marienschule Lingen) the bicycles were tested and rendered road ready in bicycle workshops belonging to the respective schools. The cost of spare parts was covered through donations. These donations came from parishioners as well as other townspeople who had heard about the action and were glad to support it financially.

The bicycles repaired in this way were handed over by the SKM members to people who needed them. They always took into account who was in most need of a bicycle. “In order not to turn it into a mere handing out of bicycles, we have asked for a small donation in the case of adult bicycles” said Deacon Eilers. “On the one hand, this was meant to show that these bicycles still had a value to them, on the other hand, they would enable us to cover the costs for the reparation of more bicycles.”

Given that the burdens on families with children are already big enough, bikes for children and teenagers were always given without a donation.

The title of the action is “Bicycles for People in Need”. “With this we state that we have everybody and not just refugees in mind,” says Deacon Eilers. Therefore, bicycles were also given to other families and individuals in need. Generally, this was done through specialized structures, only in a few individual cases through Deacon Eilers himself. A very diverse spectrum of organizations, parishes and groups such as Diakonie, the Workshop for Youth Children and Family of the Christophorus Werk Lingen, the Social Service of Catholic Women, and many others asked if they could have bicycles offered to their respective clients.

After the first official collection, many other bicycles were donated in the following weeks and months. The capacities of the schools were insufficient to set the bicycles “afloat”. Some amateur mechanics came together one weekend in the Marienschule and repaired about 25 bicycles, helped also by some refugees.

The action has been supported also by the local bicycle vendors. They have not only offered us favourable prices for spare parts, but also advice and practical help up to this day.

On March 24th, 2016, the pastoral unit, under the coordination of the “Celebrations and Culture” committee and the “Giving People a Home” project group, organized a colourful welcome celebration entitled “Come Together”. More than

200 people, refugees and parishioners had a great time together. On that occasion, ten bicycles and six bicycle trailers were handed over to the SKM. They were financed by the Bishop's Aid Fund as so-called household bicycles.

In the summer of 2016, the number of donated bicycles had surpassed 350. Some of these, through usage or age, were in serious need of repair. And so the wish to set up a "Help for Self-Help Workshop" came about. In the autumn of 2016, in cooperation with town of Lingen, the Catholic Women's Association, the youth centre and the pastoral unit, we managed to devise the first plans for this project. Besides the financing, infrastructure and organizational issues, we also needed some volunteer "experts" who would commit their hearts and hands to the workshop. The workshop started in January 2017 with four volunteers, led by Michael Altmann (SKM) and by Deacon Christian Eilers. At first, the workshop was open weekly on Tuesdays between 4 and 7 P.M. Today (March 2017), however it is clear that this schedule will be inappropriate given the "influx of customers". Meanwhile. The number of people working in the workshop rose to seven. Deacon Eilers is responsible for the organizational tasks, but also for the technical issues related to the repair of the bikes' lighting systems. Questions like: "Where do you come from, what language do you speak and what are you currently doing" are almost always asked. In the workshop, all the tools are labelled with their respective names so, it is also a language learning experience: "Please give me the number 15 screwdriver".

In the workshop, it's not all about repairing, but also about communication.