Regardless of Faith

Memoirs of Childhoods in Isolated Faith Communities

Marit Egge
ISBN 82-7481-135-6
Translated by
Friedrich Griess and Silje Berggrav

Regardless of faith

A couple of years ago, Save the Children Norway carried out a project called "Go On", providing assistance to young people who had broken out of isolated faith communities. The project revealed that Norwegian society has little knowledge about children growing up in these types of communities. The report "Regardless of Faith" is a continuation of this work, and allows people who grew up in isolated faith communities to come forward with their stories.

All the stories included in this report are based on childhood memories from life in Christian church communities not associated with the State Church [1] which all play a part in the Norwegian cultural and religious society. Save the Children would like to emphasise that the purpose of this report is not to criticise religion as such. Our aim is to draw attention to the strict limitations and violations of children's rights often prevailing in communities that suppress the free expression of thought and isolate themselves from the rest of society.

The individual rights of children to freedom of speech and religion must be discussed and assessed in light of the freedom of parents to decide for them, and their rights and duty to guide and set limits for their children. The stories included in this report reveal that these isolated communities face serious challenges in protecting children's rights to freedom of thought, belief and speech, as stated in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in Norwegian law. For Save the Children, a children's rights organisation, this is a matter of grave concern. The rights of children must also be considered in light of the ongoing establishment and development of religious-based schools.

Our thanks go to the foundation *Health and Rehabilitation* for their financial support of the project. Many thanks also to the interviewees for their openness, honesty and courage. Their stories provide us with a deeper insight into childhood in isolated communities. This knowledge calls for action.

We hope that this report and the young interviewees' clear views and experiences will create a basis for reflection and debate.

Gro Brækken
Secretary General
October 2005

[1] A state church is a religious body officially endorsed by the state. The present Norwegian state church system was established in 1536 after the Reformation in Europe. The Norwegian Lutheran State Church is formally led by and largely financed by the Norwegian state.

Introduction

"Happy childhood memories? That's a tough question. Yes, my grandmother, she always used to listen to me. She belonged to the community, but she was different from the others. She sometimes bought tickets in the lottery, which obviously wasn't permitted. Only I knew."

There are a large number of independent church communities in Norway. Some are small, while others have thousands of members. Some are newly established and have roots in the local community; others have existed for a long time and belong to a world movement. Some are in contact and dialogue with the larger society. Others are closed and isolated.

The topic of this brochure is childhood in closed faith communities. We have interviewed youths and adults whose parents were members of independent Christian communities. Some tell us of a safe childhood, while others have stronger memories of insecurity. They all, however, describe a childhood very different from most others. Regardless of how they define their childhood, they all reached a point where they experienced the strictness and isolation of their faith community as so limiting and depressing that they chose to break out. The price they had to pay was high.

There are no reliable statistics on the number of children and youths belonging to isolated faith communities. One reason is that it is not easy to define the term 'isolated'. In this project, we have included faith communities that restrict their members from freely forming their own opinions, communities that impose restrictions on information exchange between members of the community and society around them, and communities where severe sanctions are applied to people choosing to leave the community.

Although a faith community may be isolated, it does not mean that it is *unknown* to the outside world. It may in fact be highly visible in the local community, and leaders may participate in public debate. This visibility and participation may lead to a perception in the broader society that the community is not isolated and closed.

Growing up in a closed and isolated community often involves a childhood where many basic rights are violated. Children are strongly limited both in terms of what information is available to them and to what extent they can express themselves. They are deprived of the right to form personal opinions and do not have the same freedom as other children to choose their school, friends and leisure activities.

Most children born into a faith community tend to believe that they will stay there forever. They could never think that something might be wrong with the community. When doubts do appear, they blame it on their own shortcomings.

The walls surrounding the community make it as difficult for people on the outside to look in, as it is for those inside to look out. But even if their childhoods are hidden from us, it does not mean they do not concern us.

The outside world and us on the inside

- on isolation, solidarity in the group, renunciation and damnation

Children growing up in isolated faith communities do not necessarily share the same upbringings. However, they are all taught that they belong to the community. A range of methods is used to achieve this. In some families, focus is on community spirit and activities. In other families the predominating principles are punishment and the instilment of fear, guilt and damnation.

Closed faith communities put up strong barriers against the outside world. What happens *inside* should not be known *outside*. There is a common understanding of the divide between "them" and "us". Not even close relatives are part of "us" if they do not belong to the community. Children may therefore have aunts and uncles, grandparents or elder siblings with whom they have minimal contact. They do not meet regularly. They do not celebrate traditional family festivities together like Christmas, Easter or the National Day because either the community does not celebrate these occasions or it has its own way of celebrating them. Some reported of a childhood characterised by deep despair related to the fact that a grandmother, cousin or kindergarten playmate was "on the other side". The division can be so strict that if someone in the community dies, relatives outside the community are not allowed to come to the funeral.

"Grandfather lived in the outside world. It was a heavy load for me to carry - he would go to hell. This was a constant obsession with me; he must be saved and come with us."

COMPANIONSHIP AND ACTIVITY
My childhood was good, with many social activities both in the family and the community. I very much looked up to my parents. They strived to create a sense of companionship within the family, which extended to the faith community. We went on many trips. My father was a leading evangelist who travelled around and preached, and us children went along. There were plenty of good experiences and I have many happy memories. I can see now that our father manipulated us, but with a positive approach. He was conscious about not pushing us, but convincing us of what was right. We lived in a big house - and father created a playground and a football field, so that we would stay there. Only on rare occasions did I visit other children's homes, or bring someone home with me.

"We were very conscious of the fact that we belonged to a different world, a much better world - even if it could also be a very troublesome world."

The pagan world is described as a place where it is not good to live, and one should feel sorry for those who live there. The leaders of the communities often use examples of individual tragedies from the larger society to strengthen the perception of the community's superiority. Without respect for the people concerned, adolescents from school or the neighbourhood are identified and criticised at meetings and during preaching: if they have difficulties at home, if

they have drug problems or become pregnant. These people are living examples of the sorry state of the outside world.

"It was made very clear to us that we had to remain in the community. This was of utmost importance. We could not leave the community.... If we did, we would no longer have the Lord's blessing. If we had friends from the outside, we could loose our foothold and get lost in the pagan world."

"Remember, all other children are lost!"

Children attending school outside the community may face severe restrictions on who they are allowed to play with during school breaks and leisure. If the community runs its own kindergarten and school, contact with the outside world is even more controlled. Children may be told that classmates and children in the neighbourhood are not good enough to be playmates; they are lost, while they themselves are among the chosen ones who will be saved.

"We were not allowed to play with other children after school. The reasoning was that we should not be influenced by the outside world. This was quoted from the Holy Scriptures. But I did play with other children regularly and I was beaten every time I did. I wouldn't let them tame me. I so enjoyed playing with the others. They were friendly and happy and you were allowed to get mad at each other and express your opinions. So I really didn't understand why they were supposed to be so bad, compared to us."

*"They keep us busy during holidays and weekends - very clever, they knew these were times when we could make new friends***."**

During childhood, one's time and thoughts centre around activities in the community. There are children's groups, meetings and educational activities. Later on there are house meetings, conferences, prayers and fasting, missionary activities, and help services. For many this involves activities every day of the week. During holidays, there are religious camps, group travels or visits to the community's own holiday resorts. Bonds are tied inwards; the community spirit strengthened, while connections to the outside are weakened.

"You were not allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. This was a strict rule. You were supposed to meet one person, and this person you should marry."

As they grow into adolescence, it becomes even more apparent to these young people that they are different. It may be hard to deal with. They experience a sense of isolation more profoundly and begin to understand that to be kept away from the outside world is not only a protection, but also a loss.

"At school I was completely isolated. I had no friends in my class. I could not bring myself to making contact because I felt weird, different and inferior. I felt I shared no common interests with the others. I had no idea what they were talking about when they mentioned parties and boyfriends. I felt it didn't concern me at all. This was a completely different world."

PUNISHMENT AND FEAR

What I remember best, from when I was very young, is fear - the fear of God. If I did something wrong, I knew He would be there and let my parents know. I remember once when I was in the bathtub. I was 4 or 5 years old. Suddenly it occurred to me that I was not good enough to be allowed to live. There was a lot of violence. If I came home too late, dad would hold me while mum would beat me. During that time I did not go to meetings. Much of my aggression towards mum and dad stems from this time. They told me I was damned and that I should not have been born. I grew a thick skin. I learnt to keep up a façade that was hard to break through.

SENSE OF GUILT AND DAMNATION

I was taught throughout my childhood that I should be grateful, and that when I did something wrong, I should be ashamed. I often felt ashamed; I was an impulsive kid.

I was supposed to be grateful that I belonged to a community that preached the true teachings of God. Otherwise I would have gone straight to hell. This scared me to death. I imagined piles of burning coal and could almost hear the screams.

Surely there were bright sides of my childhood; I just can't remember them. What I do remember is that I never felt safe. Damnation was a constant underlying theme - even when things were good.

The human rights aspect

- On the disciplining of thought and censorship in the community

In Norway, as in several other countries, freedom of religion is seen as one of the most fundamental human rights. Many parents, community leaders and others believe that religious freedom ensures the unlimited right of parents to decide about their children's religious education. However, children have independent rights granted to them by both Norwegian law and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is in this context that we will further discuss childhood in isolated faith communities.

Some communities employ restrictions on contact *with the outside* as well as censorship on information *coming in*. This censorship limits the use of TV, radio, books, magazines, newspapers, movies and computers. The isolation can appear overwhelming. Growing up involves changing. When children and teenagers acquire new tastes, opinions and knowledge, they will usually seek to test them out in interaction with others. This is not permitted in isolated faith communities. "You are not even allowed to have free thoughts", was a recurrent statement among the interviewees. The environment where these children grew up left them with no opportunities for shaping their own individual beliefs and ideas.

"It is incredible how much power some people can have over others, especially when using the notion of God."

The Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines the right to form opinions and to freedom of thought. These are fundamental prerequisites for participation in a democratic society. Article 12 states the right of children to express their own views; article 13 outlines the right of freedom of expression including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information, while article 14 stresses the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Children growing up deprived of these rights, not only lose their fundamental rights; they are less protected and may more easily become victims of abuse of power and control by others.

The right not to be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation

Article 16 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of children to have a private life. Adolescence in particular is a period of testing limits, growing independent and searching for one's identity. This may involve new revelations, confusion and disappointment in oneself. Hence it is particularly important not to be on constant display - feeling x-rayed and unprotected.

The pastor and a small group of people close to him are responsible for generating beliefs that are to be adopted by the rest of the community. The leaders regard themselves as administrators of the true teachings; they are almost without

exception men, holding absolute authority granted to them by God. If an individual member tries to correct the leader, it may be regarded as a revolt, not only against the community, but also against God.

"The manipulation is very subtle. It is hard to point out exactly how it works; it is always present."

When looking back on their childhood, the interviewees realise that disciplining was a continuous process throughout their childhood and youth. They use words like 'manipulation', 'thought control' and 'brainwashing' when describing the mechanisms at work. In retrospect they are surprised they did not see this more clearly at an earlier stage. They do, however, see that as they were caught in the middle of it all and not knowing a 'normal' childhood to compare their own against, the manipulation was almost impossible to detect.

"The rules of the community are identical with your own. If you can't live by them, you don't belong there."

Life in the community conflicts with the right to a private life. A ten-year-old girl and her friend plaiting each other's hair were asked to stop. This could stir emotions!

The community's need to exercise control tends to increase with the adolescents' growing need for a private life. Having alternative preferences in music, clothes or education is regarded as rebellious. Having secrets, new interests or friends outside the community is seen as a provocation.

A strategy used by the community was to continually supervise the teenagers. One young man tells of how he had intended to live by the community's commands, but could not help feeling completely exposed and as though he had no control over his life. He describes a feeling of being "x-rayed and unprotected":

"We had to identify our personal goals and share them with the others. At the next meeting, we had to report back on whether we had managed. The meeting started off with intense prayers, praise and speaking in tongues. Then we had to get up on stage in front of our friends and leaders and tell them what we had been up to during the past month - for good and bad. It felt like being judged in court: had we told our daily prayers, had we saved someone? Had we been someone's witness, for whom and how many times, had we managed to recruit someone into the community? In other words: "What was our score?"."

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises children's right to health services and care, and to be protected from abuse.
The most relevant article in this context is article 19, outlining children's right to be protected from physical and mental violence, and article 24, recognising the right of the child to treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health.

"Subjection is regarded as more important than your rights."

The one-sided influence can be a form of mental abuse in itself. There are, however, more explicit methods of disciplining. Humiliation, lockout from the social environment or being removed from popular duties may be used along with strategies involving a persistent, unwanted exposure through songs of praise, prayers and speaking in tongues.

"Behind the calls of "hallelujah", there is fear. Behind the smiles and devoutness there is depression and resignation."

In some communities, a frequently used means of sanction is public reprisal. This may involve being criticised in preaching. The accusation could be diffuse, as in the example of the young man below, but the person being reprised is not allowed to dispute, explain or correct what is being said. The only acceptable way to act is by expressing shame:

*"He has made a very serious mistake. He has completely crossed the boundaries. I do **not** wish to point out what he has done. And you do **not** want to know what it was; that's how bad it is! He has been removed from all his duties. I do not want you to make speculations about the nature of his act - nor should you ask what it was. He will keep coming to meetings to try and rebuild himself."*

"Those who speak about abuse are usually the ones who become excluded. Not the abusers."

Some people have been submitted to physical punishment, violence or abuse in the name of faith and the community. Much effort is put into keeping such matters hidden, but it sometimes happens that they become known within the community. Experience shows that if the person accused does not immediately admit to any wrongdoing, little is done by the community to investigate the matter further. Should the person admit to it, the community often acts as plaintiff, defence and judge simultaneously. Often the case will be "solved" within the community without providing the victim with the necessary assistance, protection or compensation.

*"They knew about it in the community. For sure. They may not have condoned it, but I have heard afterwards that when mother was at the meetings and he was at home with me, they were wondering: "What is he doing to her now?" He was caught while trying to rape my friend's younger sister. He had to confess before the community and repent his sins. This is their tradition: to confess, to repent and to **continue**!"*

The interviewees who had *not* experienced physical punishment may also have shared the feeling that they were punished. Some speak of an intense feeling of never being good enough - of not having value. Some remember feelings of fear and insecurity related to being "on the outside", not having anyone "who wants to be with me". Even among those who have some good memories from their childhood, many talk of being entrenched in a sadness they were unable to overcome.

To disclose to the outside world the conditions within the community or at home is regarded as grave betrayal. Reporting to the police is out of the question; even seeking assistance from social services is unacceptable.

"If you really have to grow, you should grow inside the community. You will not grow in the outside world."

The right to education is firmly entrenched in Norway. We do not need the Child Convention to remind us of the rights of children in this area. However, people who have broken out of isolated faith communities report of education being neglected in a way unknown to the outside world. All that mattered was to stay in the community and serve God. If someone would still decide to pursue an education, they were encouraged not to waste too much effort on it, as it would take away from the time and duties they were meant to use their life for. The only exception would be if their education could further their call from God.

Many parents spend large amounts of their leisure time within the community. This may involve practical work, fundraising, missionary activities or community management. Service in the community equals service for God. Children accompany their parents to these activities from a very young age. Thus, for many children, little time remains to be spent for themselves - for fun, play or rest.

"One of the reasons why we had to work so hard was to prevent other thoughts from entering our minds."

The right to education implies that the education should seek to develop the child's personality and talents. In article 29, it is recognised that education shall prepare the child for a responsible life in a free society in a spirit of understanding, peace and tolerance. Article 31 reminds us that all children have the right to rest, to leisure and play.

Remain inside or break out?

- On doubts, faith and loneliness

Most people born into a faith community believe that they will remain there forever. If doubts arise, it is natural to try to chase them away. At first, it seems an impossible and forbidden thought that anything could be wrong with the community.

To open up to doubts means opening up to the horrific scenarios of damnation and isolation that childhood was filled with. From early childhood they have feared losing loved ones completely. They know a breakout in many cases involves being totally deprived of contact with the family and others in the community. In some communities, those who break out will no longer be regarded as Christians; they will be met with contempt and will lose their existing foothold completely. Despite this, some community members are struck with doubts. Some experience an "urge" from the outside world; they wish to participate, explore and discover what is out there. Others experience doubts nourished by a growing sense of unease about conditions *within* the community.

The only people I thought I could confide in were those within the community who were spiritually more aware than I was. I was completely open with them. They told me I wasn't spiritual enough. If I wanted to become more spiritual I had to pray for two hours every day. Eventually, things would become more evident to me. They told me I had a spirit of rebellion, or demons within me. I felt even more degraded when being met me with condescension and criticism. "Get a grip on yourself!" It only served to hurt me and reconfirm that I was the problem. I got really depressed, sad and upset feeling that whatever I tried didn't work. No matter how much I prayed or how much I fasted. No matter how hard I worked on myself, I didn't feel any stronger, prouder or happier. It exhausted me, and I just wanted to run away from everything. At the end I just felt I had had enough! I realised that all the pain, all my suffering - at least partly - came from these people. I felt it was so unfair. What right did they have to judge me and treat me in such a patronising way? What gave them the right to treat me that way? It made me so angry!

"There had to be something terribly wrong with me, because it seemed that everyone else at my age had no issues or doubts."

"The leaders appeared to be a strong elite that I highly trusted. I didn't dare disputing them. On the other hand, I could see that many found life very difficult; they didn't really experience a merciful God. People felt trapped in a vicious cycle and did not get any joy out of life. Faith felt like a heavy burden. The belief that we were all happy and that everyone outside was unhappy started to dissolve. On top of this, when I discovered that the supreme leader had been manipulating and lying, I was shocked! I had no idea they would use such means and that power could be abused in such a way. I guess I had experienced it before, but I hadn't realised what was going on, because I was then safely on their side. Now I understood what had happened to people who had broken out before me. It dawned on me like a huge revelation."

"I was scared to death that one day it might be proven that I was not right."

For most members the faith community has represented salvation, security and a sense of belonging. In times of doubt, they look for a confirmation of these values within the community. Instead of being met with understanding, many find that the authoritarian structures do not tolerate being challenged. It becomes apparent that there is no room for alternative ideas, that the community does not have strategies for conflict resolution, and that there is no basis for democratic management.

The reaction from the community will often serve as a push to break out instead of the opposite.

"What caused me to leave was partly a desire for a better life, partly the urge for freedom. I had never in my life felt free."

Naturally, there are more people in the communities who experience doubts from time to time, than who actually end up leaving. Those who decide to leave emphasize the need for independence and justice. One person reasoned: "I think I have a strong, innate sense of justice". "When I experience unfairness, I feel I have to do something about it", said another. Some stress the need for "freedom to think for themselves" and not to be "caged". Furthermore, they believe they have an inner strength making it possible to carry through what they had decided. They all agree the price has been high.

"We started talking about it, and it felt like a revolution."

Because one's *own* shortcomings are used as an explanation for doubt, many young people do not even consider the fact that other members may be having similar doubts about the community and their faith. Everyone seems to believe they are alone with their doubts. Because companionship has always been so strongly emphasized by the community, the feeling of loneliness can hit hard. When they all of a sudden realise that they are not alone with their thoughts, it can be overwhelming:

"I could not believe what I heard - that three of us would be feeling exactly the same way? That meant we had all been playing an act, smiling and applauding the leaders. Two other members feeling the same way I did! I couldn't believe it! Would I have managed to break out and land on my feet if I had been all alone? It would have been very difficult."

"When I felt ready to leave the community, it felt like I was super-ready. I knew I would have a better life on the outside, and that I would not survive if I had to stay on the inside."

When the breakout finally happens, many describe it as a relief. For some, there may have been several years of doubt and lack of belonging - as if they were walking through no man's land. For others, the process may be shorter, the breakout more sudden and the departure more painful.

"Grandmother, who I loved dearly, was like a shadow in the conflict. I remember leaving - she met me at the stairs and said: - Are you leaving nanny? Tears were rolling down her face. This was our last contact. I don't know if she is still alive."

Inputs from the outside

- On distrust and peeking through the wall

Looking back on their childhoods several interviewees wished that someone outside the community had seen and understood what conditions they were growing up in. At the same time, they realize that this was probably close to impossible. The walls built around the community made it just as difficult for society to look in, as for those inside to look out.

If someone from the outside were to offer information, help or support, there is no guarantee that it would have been accepted, although it was needed. The distrust in the community to anything coming from the outside is so embedded that it blocks any attempt to help. One person explains: "If the school counselling services had approached me, I would have been sceptical and told the community straight away. It could have served to push me even further inside." One informant grins when recalling his own scepticism; if someone with long hair and a beard had approached him, he would not stand a chance, "whether he was from the social services, a psychiatrist or just anyone." He continues: "It would have to be someone I fully trusted, with whom I had built a strong relationship over time - then perhaps I would have been open to advice. In any case it would have to be a Christian person. I would have been extremely cautious if anyone had raised critical questions about the community."

"Because we all live in a Christian nation with many faith communities and missionary activities, it is difficult to spot the problems. That's why it is so important that more people know these things - so they can look for the warning signals."

"In the faith community where I grew up, everything may have looked ok to the outside, very positive and very open. It had a totally different image to sects where stories came out that everyone could tell were bad. It is part of their strategy. There is reason to remain on guard when people want to do their own thing and isolate themselves from society around. In all closed communities some sort of abuse will necessarily exist. The isolation is an abuse in itself, and it is very dangerous."

"I knew that I had the right to decide. That meant a lot to me."

One possible strategy is to focus information on children's rights. In doing so, attention is given to circumstances that apply to all children, and the faith community or religion is not put under particular scrutiny. This may help raise the children's awareness that they actually have a choice: "...and it may make you realise that you have value, no matter what you choose", suggested one girl. With this awareness of choices, she had managed to build a network of friends outside the community, which served as her bridge to the outside world.

"Having their own school - that would be the worst thing that could happen. They would become even more isolated."

School is a place where children meet and spend a lot of time. School often represents a different culture and stimulates other experiences than life at home or in the community can offer. For some children, this may strengthen the feeling of being different, but it may also serve to boost independence and awareness that they have a variety of choices.

Children and adolescents belonging to faith communities running their own schools will not have the opportunity to be stimulated in a different way. Among the interviewees, there is a deep scepticism regarding the increase in religious private schools. They stress the importance of close follow-up and supervision by educational and local authorities. This should be carried out in community kindergartens as well as schools. Our interviewees suggest teachers in social studies must be employed from the outside. This way, community children will be guaranteed knowledge about the larger society.

"This information must reach them while they are still being educated."

Another way to reach children and young people growing up in faith communities is by increasing the level of knowledge about how they live. Several interviewees suggested that all higher education related to working with children and young people should include course components on the way isolated faith communities are structured, managed and regulated, and the taboos that these children may have been taught. This is a way to increase the understanding of these children's upbringing. Increased understanding is imperative to ease the burden on these young people.

Life on the outside - how to live life on your own

"You have two choices - letting misery take over, or choosing to move on. I decided to get a grip on things and deal with all my issues. The hatred - I managed to let it go, and today I can honestly say I am not even bitter. I don't lead a glamorous life; but I believe it has its upsides. If I were to blame the community for everything that didn't work out for me, it would mean that I had let them win."

When young people move away from home for the first time, they will usually receive a great deal of support from their parents in establishing a new home. In addition, they will have a sound understanding about the society around them. For young people breaking out of isolated faith movements, creating a new life outside is quite another battle. They need to grow roots and establish a life within a system they have been taught to despise. They are required to change their whole mindset, not least about who they are. Coming from a situation where they were fully protected, they are now completely unprotected, not knowing or trusting many people, not having the support from family and friends. They only have themselves.

Many ex-community members have been brought up believing that they are sinful and guilty. With this in mind, it is difficult to find a new foothold, trust your own skills and dare believing that you may mean something to others. Acceptance, practical assistance, networks and time are four important cornerstones.

"The only thing obvious to us was that we had to get away - but to what, was less clear."

Acceptance and understanding

"As long as these faith communities exist, there must be someone on the outside who is ready to accept us wholeheartedly!" This was the message from one young man who had broken out. Another ex-member longed for "a person who would welcome me without asking questions and would tell me I am good enough just the way I am. I am good enough!"

The vulnerable position they are in after breaking out could have been made safer if there was someone or something ready to accept them. Many have gone through life not feeling accepted for who they are, for their opinions and their choices. If they are to successfully exchange suspicion with trust, they need a forum where their stories, processes and losses are met with understanding.

Until today, ex-community members looking for support have either received assistance through the existing social services, or they have joined support groups established by other ex-members. Those seeking out help from professional counsellors have sometimes experienced an inability to relate, knowledge and understanding for their unique experiences. Only rarely is the significance of religion included in therapeutic and counselling sessions.

Those seeking help from support groups will often have their reality confirmed by others, but there is little room for nuances and confrontation. At worst, familiar authoritarian structures may reappear in a different guise.

What many ex-members would wish for is a service that combines professional counselling with self-lived experiences - a space for reflection and new orientation.

Knowledge and practical assistance

Ex-community members are usually not well equipped to understand or orient themselves in the world around them. They do not share a common platform or recognise the cultural codes. Having spent their young life in an overprotected environment with strict regulations, they are confronted with a youth culture that is strongly extrovert, individualistic, egocentric and offering a wide variety of choices.
From a world of confined beliefs and subservience, they encounter a public sphere of knowledge-based confrontation and discourse.

When meeting youths who have grown up in isolated faith communities, it is difficult to fully understand that young people who have lived their whole life in Norway:

- do not have basic knowledge about Norwegian society nor an idea of what they have been deprived of;
- are not used to making decisions about their own lives, and experience the range of choices open to them as a burden and a challenge;
- have not been encouraged to develop their skills and talents, and hence lack the confidence to continue with an education;
- have never had their basic rights respected and therefore do not have the courage to voice them.

Young ex-community members express the need for a place to seek assistance, and some wish for a mentor who could guide them in their new life situation and help them "interpret" society - someone who will give them time and space to make the right choices regarding education and social life.

Network

"When you leave an isolated sect and have no idea what to do with your life - that's when the negative thoughts creep in. If you're not able to establish a group of friends, and fill your days with work, education or other activities, there is a short road to depression, suicidal thoughts and a strong feeling of guilt."

In many isolated faith communities, group solidarity is firmly founded in the fear of all that exists on the outside. The price paid by the individual may be to distrust the whole world. Additionally, one's ties to family and faith community may be broken, or very fragile.

Establishing a new network of friends may be very demanding. Many feel that they have a lot to hide, little to give and that the ability to receive is almost destroyed. There are many things they feel they cannot share. Perhaps they decide to talk about the lighter issues, experiences other people can more easily relate to - such as not being allowed to celebrate Christmas, and similar superficial matters. The more difficult, underlying issues are not necessarily touched upon even after years of friendship. The reason may be that they do not trust that other people will be able to relate or understand their experiences.

Various faith communities have different sets of rules on how strict they are about allowing contact between members who break out and their families. In some communities, it is so strict that if parents do make contact with their children - for example to see their grandchildren - they will be severely reprimanded. In other communities, such restrictions may not exist, but contact will by nature still be limited. What used to bind them together is today what separates them. It may be very difficult, even for close family members, to build a common platform for a new relationship.

In addition, the break itself may have been so marked by threats, rejection and sanctions that rebuilding a bridge to the people left behind, seems an impossible task. One young man who had experienced a dramatic break, said: "The physical wounds may be healed, but the mental scars… There is a saying that time heals everything, but I'm not so sure. I don't think it's true."

Regardless of the nature of the break, it is vital that these people are assisted in sorting out their relationship to close family members still living in the community. Some will have to put their hope of a reunion behind them; others may slowly be able to rebuild old family ties.

Time

The stories told by young people who have left isolated faith communities are all different. They do, however, share the experience of feeling that the boundaries surrounding their childhood and youth were too suffocating, and as a result, they eventually decided to leave. They fought their way out to a newfound freedom, but they were not always sure how to benefit from it.

For some, the cost of breaking out has been so high that they will need a great deal of time before they are able to make investments in their new life. It is important to give them this time, because with time, opportunities will follow:

"There are so many things in my life that I need to work through. I need to figure out who I am, see? What I want to do with my life. It is hard, but I guess it is better to do it now than when I am 40. I'm experiencing a new freedom - it scares me a bit, but I also feel a lot stronger. I feel I am finally discovering myself and who I really am. Even if this has been a long and hard process, I have won!"