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## Chapter 7: Us and Them

### Faith-Based Organisations and Street Youths in Søndre Nordstrand

*If you don't play football, there is nothing to do*  
(Aalan, 21-year-old male, and Imran,  
leader in a Muslim organisation,  
Søndre Nordstrand).

#### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter we describe and analyse faith-based organisations' (FBOs) activities for and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand, one of the most diverse city districts of Oslo. We ask whether these activities and engagements contribute to social cohesion, focusing particularly on whether and how they relate to youths at the margins of the local communities in the city district. The case study focuses on how the FBOs' activities for and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand relate to youth at the margins of their communities rather than how youths at the margins relate to the FBOs, reflecting a slight reorientation in comparison with the other case studies in this book. Our approach problematises the idea that young people not in education, employment or training (NEET young people) are at the margins in this context. Elsewhere, Bjørn Hallstein Holte (2018a) has argued that the NEET concept did not mean the same to the people we talked to in Søndre Nordstrand as it does in published research. In Søndre Nordstrand it was understood as referring mainly to teenage boys who were associated with youth gangs, petty crime or drugs. Our research indicates that these youths were at the margins of the local communities, but it is not clear that they were in NEET situations to a greater extent than other young people. There may also have been other groups of NEET young people, including girls and young women, who were rarely mentioned by the people we talked to. We therefore use the emic category

“street youths” to describe the youths at the margins in Søndre Nordstrand rather than adopt the NEET concept in our case study.<sup>1</sup>

In the next section we briefly describe Søndre Nordstrand city district. We then outline the methods and data used in this case study. Our empirical account begins with a synthesis of what the youths we interviewed told us they missed in, or wanted for, their local communities, and continues with an overview of FBOs’ activities and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand. We analyse how the FBOs recruit young people to understand how their youth activities relate to the street youths. We then proceed to discuss why FBOs engage with the youths. In the conclusion we return to the question of how the FBOs’ activities and engagements with the youths contribute to social cohesion in Søndre Nordstrand.

## 7.2 Søndre Nordstrand

Søndre Nordstrand made media headlines when it became the first city district in Oslo where over half the population had an “immigrant background” (e.g. *Aftenposten*: 2012).<sup>2</sup> About 51 per cent of the 37 100 individuals who lived in Søndre Nordstrand at the beginning of 2014 had immigrant backgrounds from 147 foreign countries, of whom the largest number were from Pakistan (Wiggen et al.: 2015, 113). Public statistics indicate that the proportion of people with immigrant backgrounds was higher among young people than for older cohorts. Søndre Nordstrand also had some of the highest incidences of crowded living in Oslo and the average educational and income levels were lower in Søndre Nordstrand than they were in the central and western city districts. Søndre Nordstrand had the highest school dropout rate of the city districts in Oslo in 2014, when 37.2 per cent of young people aged 21 to 29 who had started upper-secondary school had not finished their three- or four-year courses within five years (Oslo Municipality: 2016; cf. Holte: 2018b, 6–10).<sup>3</sup>

The city districts of Oslo are administrative constructs rather than communities in a sociological sense. In Søndre Nordstrand communities have rather formed

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1 The street youths referred to in this case study did not generally live and sleep outside as some of the youths in the South African case studies did, but rather lived with their families and possibly in some cases in child welfare institutions.

2 The term “immigrant background” is used by Statistics Norway to describe immigrants and individuals born in Norway to two immigrant parents.

3 Upper-secondary school is the lowest level of non-compulsory education in Norway; it is attended by nearly all young people in the relevant age group. Rates of non-completion and how they compare with the corresponding rates of other European countries have become a main concern in Norwegian youth policy (Vogt: 2017; see also Chapter 2).

in different suburbs within the city district with slightly different histories and characteristics (Holte: 2020). The two main suburbs in the city district are Holmlia and Mortensrud. Holmlia has a train station and Mortensrud has a subway station, and both suburbs are therefore closely connected to the city centre. Both have shopping centres and several FBOs. Bjørndal and Hauketo are minor suburbs, and Hauketo also has a train station. In the suburbs youths from different backgrounds meet in public primary and lower-secondary schools, which virtually all Norwegian youths attend until age 16, and in sports clubs. Places in primary schools (6–13 years) and lower-secondary schools (13–16 years) are normally allocated according to geographical criteria in Norway, bringing together youths in local communities. Places in upper-secondary school (16–19/20 years), which nearly all young people also attend, are allocated based on applications ranked by grade point averages. Many youths in Oslo attend upper-secondary school in another part of the city from where they live, and from the age of 16 most youths have networks that span across local communities and city districts, at least to some extent.

When we began our research in late 2014, there were seven Christian organisations, five Muslim organisations, a Buddhist organisation and a Sikh organisation in Søndre Nordstrand, in addition to four parishes of the Church of Norway.<sup>4</sup> Public subsidies for the Church of Norway and subsidies payable on a per member basis to other religious communities in Norway mean that lists of membership in such organisations are publicly available. The largest FBOs in Søndre Nordstrand in terms of membership were the Church of Norway parishes, with a total of some 14 440 members in 2014 (or somewhat less than half of the population of the city district; NSD: 2015). Five other FBOs in the city district had 2 973 members; four of the FBOs reported membership that also included branches located outside the city district; while five of the FBOs were not on the list (Ministry of Culture: 2014).<sup>5</sup> Our interviews and observations indicate that some of the FBOs that were not on the list had very small numbers of members, the smallest among them being constituted by just a few families. While the parish structure of the Church of Norway means that its members belong to a nearby parish church, some of the other FBOs in Søndre Nordstrand had members who lived further away, in other parts of the city district, in other parts of the city, and even further away. This reflects, once again,

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4 Two of the Church of Norway parishes merged in 2016 and are treated as one FBO in this case study.

5 The number of members in the Church of Norway and other religious communities in Norway does not reflect the number of people who regularly attend services and worship, or the number of people who identify as religious people (cf. Chapter 3). The combination of high rates of membership, high rates of adherence to life rites and low worship participation rates in the national churches in the Nordic countries are sometimes referred to as the “Nordic Paradox” (Bäckström et al.: 2004). Thus, the number of members stated here must not be taken to reflect the number of people that engaged regularly with the religious organisations.

how Søndre Nordstrand city district is not an isolated community, but composed of several suburbs that are interlinked with each other, as well as with the rest of Oslo. The FBOs also had very different resources at their disposal. Some had their own meeting places in Søndre Nordstrand, while others rented the venues of other FBOs. Among the venues used as meeting places by FBOs, some were purposefully built as churches, mosques or a temple, while others were built for other purposes and had been converted to their current use. These included a former kindergarten, a former shop and a former warehouse.

Many FBOs effectively cater for specific segments of the population; in this chapter we distinguish between “minority” and “majority” FBOs. In the minority FBOs the leaders and most of the members had immigrant backgrounds, while the leaders and most of the members of the majority FBOs could be described as “ethnic Norwegians”. This term is somewhat vague, but it is used in everyday speech to describe the majority of Norwegians who do not have immigrant backgrounds. In the analysis of the prominent Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (2002), Norwegian ethnicity is furthermore underpinned by ideas about “equality as sameness”, metaphors of home and family life, and Lutheran Christianity (see also Thun: 2012). All the Church of Norway parishes in Søndre Nordstrand were majority FBOs by our definition, but so were some other Christian organisations and the Buddhist organisation. The Muslim organisations and some of the Christian organisations were minority FBOs. We focus on the ethnicity of the FBOs’ members rather than the religion the FBOs espouse when we define our majority and minority concepts, because what we call minority FBOs share certain concerns and characteristics that are not shared by what we call majority FBOs, as we show in this case study. We thus find it a useful distinction.

### 7.3 Methods and Data Used in the Case Study

As we alluded to in the introduction above, we started our research for this case study aiming to interview NEET young people. However, we were not able to recruit NEET young people in a systematic way. Our attempts at cooperating with public welfare services to do so failed. Representatives were often willing to talk about NEET young people, but they could not help us talk with the youths. They either declined our requests for help recruiting NEET young people for interviews with reference to the privacy of their clients, or referred us to superiors who refused to talk to us. When we asked secular civil society organisations and FBOs in the city district that we knew arranged activities for youths, they generally told us that the people we were looking for did not participate in their activities (Holte: 2018b, 25–26). As noted, the NEET concept was generally understood as referring to teenage boys who were associated with youth gangs, petty crime or drug usage,

or street youths, rather than the broad selection of young people that the term refers to in published research (Holte: 2018a). This was the first indication during our research that NEET young people were seen as others – or as “them” – in the FBOs, a point we return to in the conclusion.

After a lengthy process (accounted for in Holte: 2018b, 25–29), we interviewed only two NEET young men, whom we met almost haphazardly, before we decided to focus on how the FBOs in the city district and their youth groups related to the street youths rather than on how NEET young people related to FBOs. The bulk of this case study therefore draws on interviews with 17 adult representatives from 12 FBOs and 6 focus group interviews with 34 youths (16 girls and 18 boys) from 5 FBO youth groups. The youths were included in our study based on their ongoing relationship with FBOs, and they had varied ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. In order to avoid asking stigmatising questions in the focus groups, we did not collect data on their backgrounds in a systematic way. The representatives were religious leaders or board members of the FBOs. We selected the FBOs, leaders and representatives after we had contacted all the FBOs in the city district and asked whether they had contact with youths between 16 and 24 years. In 12 of the FBOs the representatives we spoke to said they had contact with youths. The 17 representatives we interviewed came from these FBOs. Five of the FBOs in the city district were excluded from our research during this process, most of them because they had little contact with youths.<sup>6</sup> We feel confident that our research gives a comprehensive, but perhaps not complete, overview of the FBOs’ activities for and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand at the time of our research.

Among the 12 FBOs that were part of our research, the adult representatives from the Buddhist organisation and 4 of the Christian organisations told us that some youths participated in their ordinary activities, but that they did not have a youth group or any separately arranged youth activities. Representatives from both of the relevant Church of Norway parishes, one of the Christian minority organisations, and 4 Muslim organisations said that their FBOs had youth groups. We asked these representatives to help us set up focus group interviews with their youth groups, which led to focus group interviews with 5 youth groups.<sup>7</sup> The adult

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6 Representatives from two Christian organisations and the Sikh organisation were not included because they told us that they did not have any contact with youths. A Muslim organisation was not included because we failed to establish any contact with them. Two of the three Church of Norway parishes that remained after the merger in 2016 (see note 4) had merged their youth groups. We interviewed representatives from only one of these parishes.

7 The representatives from two of the Muslim organisations were not able to convene their youth group members for focus group interviews. One of the FBOs was temporarily without a meeting place and the representatives told us that this had a detrimental effect on their youth group. The FBO was starting the construction of a mosque around the time of our interview. The other FBO was a local branch of a large mosque in central Oslo, where the young people mostly met in the downtown venues.

representatives whom we had interviewed introduced us to the youth group leaders, who recruited the focus group participants for us, except in one of the Church of Norway parishes, where the focus group interview was conducted as part of an ordinary youth group meeting. This means that the youths we interviewed may have been among the most active in the FBOs.<sup>8</sup> They were also among the oldest youth group members, in part also because they had to be 16 years or older to participate in our research. The focus group interviews nevertheless provided insight into the experiences of youths in the city district and were a means of validating what the adult representatives told us.

We conducted most of our interviews on the FBOs' premises, making the interviewees feel comfortable and providing us with a sense of the material resources available in the different FBOs.<sup>9</sup> For the focus group interviews with the youths this – as well as the presence of youth group leaders who were also the sons and daughters of religious leaders in some of the FBOs – may have made it difficult for the young interviewees to be critical of the FBOs. With only two exceptions, our interviews were conducted in Norwegian, recorded and transcribed. One representative requested that we conduct his interview in English, although he was also fluent in Norwegian. Another interview was not recorded but transcribed shortly afterwards from notes we took during the interview. We have translated the interview excerpts used in this case study from Norwegian and edited them slightly for readability, but also tried to retain the flow of the spoken originals.

## 7.4 What Young People Want

We started all our focus group interviews with youths by asking what the participants saw as good and bad about their local communities. The first and sometimes only bad thing that came up was how they felt that many people associate their communities with failed integration and social dysfunction. The high proportion of immigrants in the city district is viewed with suspicion by some, and in recent years

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In other words, it was unlikely that these two FBOs had active youth groups in Søndre Nordstrand at the time of our research.

- 8 We did not ask the representatives or youth group leaders to invite youths with a specific type of background, as we wanted our focus groups to reflect the composition of the youth groups and the youths' thoughts about this. We did not want to force our own categories on them.
- 9 Exceptions were a representative from a Muslim organisation whom we interviewed in his home because the mosque could not accommodate our female interviewers, and the representatives from another Muslim organisation whom we interviewed in a church because their FBO did not have a meeting place at the time of our interview. The representatives from the latter FBO suggested that we meet in a Church of Norway parish church as they knew the priests there well. Not being able to meet us on their premises also suggested something about the material resources available in these FBOs.

media coverage and public discourse on the suburbs in eastern Oslo have focused on criminal youth gangs, explicitly or implicitly seen as composed of “immigrant youths” (cf. Holte: 2018b, 3–5). Some of the young people felt stigmatised by the stereotypes other people had of their communities. In one of the Church of Norway youth groups, the youth group members told us that a rough street culture was causing problems in their everyday lives, by and large in line with the media coverage and public discourse. We had separate focus groups for boys and girls in this parish church. The boys told us about having their bikes stolen and other misdemeanours, while the girls told us about being harassed by “refugees”, which made them feel insecure, as the following exchange from the focus group interview illustrates:

Participant 1: There are some refugees in particular, who are very aggressive, for example at the [shopping] centre, and they look down on girls, and we often hear comments if we go to the centre or even just pass by those boys. So it’s, well, it’s them.

Participant 2: I’ve at least been called ‘whore’ and [they’ve told me to] ‘go back to the kitchen’. We get comments like that.

Participant 1: They don’t really respect girls.

In the focus group interview in the youth groups in the other FBOs the young people told us that they heard about problems in their communities, but they did not experience them first-hand. When we asked about street youths in our focus group interview in the other Church of Norway youth group, a discussion developed when one of the participants tried to downplay their significance:

Participant 1: No, I don’t see any of that. I don’t know any of them. [He laughs.]

Participant 2: We only know them from school.

Participant 1: It sounds so bad and pervasive, but it’s not, it’s a gang of about ...

Participant 3: It’s pretty bad.

Participant 1: Yes, but how many are they? There are about ten of the younger ones out of, well, how many youths are we [in this suburb]? And there are a few others in their twenties who are into organised crime at times, but I went to a police conference and they said that they mostly to go to the city centre to do their things anyways ... [I]t’s not like a totally all-encompassing problem, it is more of a problem for those it concerns.

As a group, these young people emphasised how serious the problems were, but also that they concerned other youths more than themselves. The participants in this focus group interview were more eager to talk about what they liked about the communities in their suburbs, as most of the youths in our focus groups were. They mentioned the many new sport facilities and the different activities that were available for youths, the diverse social environment, and their down-to-earth neighbours whom, they said, were very tolerant of cultural differences.

Although they were happy with the variety of activities they could engage in, many focus group participants thought there were too few places where they could meet friends in informal settings (see also Guttu & Schmidt: 2010, 107). Using a phrase that we heard several times during our research, both youths and adult representatives suggested that there was “nothing to do” if you did not play football, the most widely played sport among Norwegian youths. In some focus group interviews the youths talked about how organised sports demanded too much of their time and attention; a few individuals said that they needed places to escape from the stress and pressure of their everyday lives. In one of the Church of Norway parishes the youths who participated in our focus group interview agreed that they valued the youth services in their church every Thursday afternoon as a place to escape the stress caused by the demands of “parents, school, and sports”. There were several public youth clubs in the city district that were popular with children and younger teenagers, but they did not attract many youths of the ages focused on in our case study. A report commissioned for a publicly financed area development programme found that youths in Søndre Nordstrand rather used public transportation hubs, shopping centres and fast-food stalls as meeting places (Guttu & Schmidt: 2010, 108–109).

The issue of having somewhere to meet in informal settings also came up in the interviews with the two NEET young men mentioned above. After a slow start, our interview with Martin (20-year-old male) livened up when we asked him to tell us what he did on a normal day. He spoke of how he had been bored most days since he finished school about a year earlier, but had failed to secure an apprenticeship.<sup>10</sup> By the time of our interview, several months had passed during which he had done “nothing”. He said he kept in touch with his friends by visiting them in the evenings and on weekends. He had also made new friends in a martial arts club he had joined since he finished school, but he still spent much time alone, online with his

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10 Apprenticeships at regular work places are an integrated, but not mandatory, part of vocational tracks in Norwegian upper-secondary schools. The low availability of apprenticeships has been a major reason for lower completion rates in vocational tracks than in academic tracks, as nearly a third of applicants do not get an apprenticeship (Bäckman et al.: 2011, 13; Vogt: 2017). Some youths in vocational tracks who do not get an apprenticeship do not opt for the school-based alternative and thus “drop out” of their education.



computer. He had participated in a job-seeker course that was organised by his school for students who did not get apprenticeships, “[s]o at least for one month I had something to do.” When we asked if there was anything an FBO could have done for him during the year, he replied that “the church”, where he had been a youth leader for a few years after his confirmation, could have provided:

someone to talk to, right? ... like, open talk, with others who do not have a job or something, like with the vicar or something like that. To talk about where, or whether anybody has a network that they can use to get a job.

Aalan (21-year-old male), the other NEET young man we interviewed, also told us that he wanted somewhere to meet other youths in life situations similar to his own. He saw himself as resourceful and able to help others, and suggested that a “club” should be built “so that we can help each other”. When asked how such a club would work, he explained:

When you’re in your twenties, you’re not looking for a place to relax or just to get out of the house. You’re there [at the club] to talk to others your age and to find somewhere to go, so that you can set your alarm clock to six o’clock in the morning and you just have to meet up for whatever appointment you and the boys have set up together.

Overall, the young people we interviewed wanted venues where they could relax, meet and help each other. They did not necessarily see this as a responsibility of the local FBOs, although some indicated that local churches and mosques could do this, or already did so. In a country such as Norway where the majority of youths participate in education and employment, social as well as economic marginalisation is a likely outcome for those who do not participate (cf. Chapter 3). The two NEET young men we interviewed wanted somewhere to meet young people in situations similar to their own and from where they could help each other find “a job” or set up an “appointment”.

## 7.5 What FBOs Provide for the Youths

The adult representatives we interviewed told us about different activities for and engagements with the youths. Most of the FBOs provided religious teaching for children and youths, where religious leaders or adult volunteers lectured or held special services for young people. For example, Masoud, a leader in a Muslim organisation, told us that he lectured to the youth group in his mosque every Sunday. The lectures were about religious matters, but also focused on practical

aspects of living in the Norwegian context in which they found themselves. The lecture was also sometimes followed by other activities. For example, the mosque held education fairs where Masoud spoke about the importance of education and employment from a theological perspective, and the youths and their parents could meet university students from different fields, most of whom were also members of the FBO.

In some FBOs youth group members taught the younger children. In one of the Christian minority organisations, for example, youth group members taught Sunday school for children while the parents attended Sunday service. In the Church of Norway parishes, recent confirmands were invited to volunteer as leaders for subsequent generations of confirmands, as Martin had done.

Representatives from minority FBOs told us that their religious leaders took on mediatory roles when there was a clash between immigrant parents' cultural background and the youth culture that their children grew up with in Norway. Representatives from some of the larger minority FBOs also saw it as their role to mediate between their members and public welfare services by inviting welfare workers to hold seminars for FBO members. Some of these seminars concerned issues related to bringing up children and youths in Norway (see also Holte: 2020). The representatives we interviewed in two of the Muslim organisations had grown up in Norway, while the representatives from the other two Muslim organisations and one of the Christian minority organisations had lived in Norway for several decades. All the adult representatives we interviewed knew the Norwegian language well and some of them were also active as politicians. They justified taking on the mediatory roles by referring to how they had lived in Norway for many years and knew the country and welfare system well.

Representatives from three of the Muslim organisations emphasised that most of the activities in their mosques, including the Friday speeches, were held in Norwegian so the youths could understand what was said. This represents an important difference from earlier studies on Norwegian mosques. The religious historian Kari Vogt (2000, 93–98) found that Norwegian Muslims wanted imams with a knowledge of Norwegian language, civic issues and culture (see also Jacobsen: 2002, 122; Jacobsen: 2011, 205–206, 264–265). Yet only eight of twenty imams in Oslo at the beginning of the century spoke Norwegian well, while an additional two were taking Norwegian language classes (Vogt: 2000, 95).<sup>11</sup> Other research has confirmed that Norwegian mosques have tended to be divided along ethnic and ideological lines, often employing religious leaders from abroad who do not speak Norwegian (Jacobsen: 2011, 67–70; Østberg: 2003, 57; Sultan: 2012, 169). Sissel

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11 Some of the adult representatives we interviewed were board members in the mosques and not imams. Some of the imams we met in Søndre Nordstrand did not speak Norwegian well.

Østberg (2003, 54–55) noted that some of the mosques in her research would use Norwegian as a language of instruction for youths, “if necessary”, while there were discussions about introducing Norwegian as a language of instruction for youths in other mosques that had not yet done so. At the time of our research a decade later, using Norwegian as a language of instruction for youths was the mainstream position among the Muslim organisations in Søndre Nordstrand. This may reflect the changing situation of Islam in Norway as new generations of Muslims are born and raised in the country.

In addition to the activities led by religious leaders and other adults mentioned so far, some FBOs had semi-independent youth groups. As we mentioned above, representatives from seven FBOs said they had youth groups, and we conducted focus group interviews with five of them. The adult representatives were positive about giving the youths space to meet, and some talked about this as supporting youth initiatives to build meeting places. The youth groups met regularly and did different activities together, some of which were religious in nature but others not. Some of the Muslim organisations allowed youths (mainly boys) to sleep over on their premises and representatives from several Christian organisations talked about bringing youths to denominational camps and Christian conferences. The representatives told us that this offered opportunities for the youths to connect with the FBOs, learn more about the religion, and practise the rituals and worship. For some of them, staying in the churches and mosques was important because it provided young people with an escape from the dangers and “temptations” of the streets. We return to this point shortly.

Yet representatives from Muslim organisations told us that they had to work hard to keep their venues open for the youths. Older members did not understand how important it was for the youths to be able to stay in the mosques, and complained about the mess and the noise they made. Waseem, a leader in a Muslim organisation who was in his late twenties and had grown up in Norway, said:

Older people, in a way they don't get it. We get these things better because we have been there ourselves, right? Many of them think that those who come to the mosque, they are in a way, they are angels, that they don't have any temptations or things like that. So they say '[w]hy can they not just go home?' We try to explain to them that this is not how it is. If you close the mosque, they will not just go home – there are thousands of other places where they could go and where they will go. They get phone calls all the time about different places, '[j]oin us for this or that,' so it's not true that because they have started to come to the mosque all those temptations are gone. The temptations are there and they have to fight them every day and we have to give them this opportunity.

That Søndre Nordstrand has a high incidence of crowded living conditions and that the young people we interviewed wanted venues where they could relax, meet and help each other, as we have already mentioned, can underline the value of the FBO youth groups and their more informal activities.

## 7.6 How FBOs Recruit Youths

The adult representatives and the young people we interviewed told us that activities in the FBOs and youth groups were open to all young people who wanted to join them. The only exception was one of the mosques, which did not have facilities to include girls and young women in their activities.<sup>12</sup> Yet when we conducted focus group interviews with youth group members from different FBOs, the groups we met were largely homogenous. The young people in the Church of Norway parishes were mostly youths who could be described as ethnic Norwegians. All the young people who participated in our focus group in one of the Christian minority FBOs had African backgrounds, and the participants in our focus groups in the Muslim organisations had backgrounds from South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. We met a few people who could be described as ethnic Norwegians when we visited minority FBOs and a few people with immigrant backgrounds in the majority FBOs, but they were generally older and did not participate in our focus group interviews.

The homogeneity of the youth groups in a diverse city district such as Søndre Nordstrand must be understood against how the different FBOs recruit young members. One of the most important sources of new members for FBO youth groups is parents who are members of the FBOs. When we asked how the youths in our focus groups became involved in the FBOs, many answered that they had come with their parents. Some had been coming to the churches and mosques since they were children, while others had become involved more recently. In the Church of Norway youth groups, confirmation training is an important source of recruitment. As mentioned in Chapter 3, over 60 per cent of Norwegian teenagers participate in the confirmation ritual of the Church of Norway. Beyond these two forms of recruitment, most of the adult representatives we interviewed saw it as the job of the youth group members to invite other youths to the youth groups. Kristoffer, a representative from one of the Church of Norway parishes, said: “My job is not to recruit youth group members, but to enable the youth to recruit new members.” Other representatives told us that they encouraged the youths who were active in

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12 The representative we interviewed assured us that they were planning an expansion to address this issue.

the FBOs to invite their friends to activities. Kristian, a pastor in a small church attended mostly by people who could be described as ethnic Norwegians, said he wanted his church to be a “bring-a-friend church”. However, because individual members’ families and friends are likely to be like the members themselves in various ways, all these forms of recruitment reproduce the homogeneous youth groups rather than lead to diversification of their membership. The homogeneous youth groups were not an outcome that the youths or leaders in the FBOs desired, but a result of their recruitment strategies.

Two representatives told us that they worked with youths outside their organisation’s venues. Roland, the pastor in a church mainly attended by people with backgrounds from Africa, told us that he was “still a pastor” when he was not in his church, for example, when he watched his son’s team play football. Speaking of his son’s team mates, he said that “they all get to know I’m a pastor. And because of that, I will tell you, maybe I have some privileges to hear some things. They can confide in me.” We did not get a sense that these youths came to his church. Waseem, a leader in one of the Muslim organisations, told us that both adults and youth group members in his mosque went out to invite people to the mosque. He explained that the mosque was part of an “inner mission” movement and that it focused on inviting people who had “a Muslim background”. In our focus group interview with youth group members from the mosque, the youths told us that they made an important contribution to this work because they connected more easily with other youths than the older members of the organisation did. When we asked them whom they targeted, one of the boys replied that “we talk to people we know have a Muslim background.” When we asked how they can know this, the boy continued:

[This suburb] is a small place. To be honest, it doesn’t take much time to see if a person is Pakistani or Somali, and then you know that he has a Muslim background. Also, most of us grew up in [this suburb] and we know almost everyone who is our own age and younger, so we know the people we talk to.

Finally, some representatives also told us about youths who showed up to their FBOs’ activities without having been invited. Possibly because of how they understood our research, the examples the representatives gave mostly concerned individuals with personal problems or youths coming in from “the streets”. Thomas, the representative from the Buddhist organisation, told us that young people with mental problems contacted them. The FBOs did not have special programmes for this group, but included them in their activities on the condition that they also sought professional help, if it was needed. In our focus group interview in one of the Muslim organisations, a young man told us that he had ended up “on the

streets” and was selling drugs because he did not have a job. He first came to the mosque about five months before the interview, after a dramatic family incident had made him “depressed”. He said he was becoming “less and less” depressed at the time of our interview. Unlike other influences, he knew that the other youth group members would not send him “down the wrong path”: “They teach me something good, I learn something good from them. Some of them are younger than me, actually, and yet I learn a lot that is good from them.”

Kristian, the pastor who was quoted above as wanting to build a “bring-a-friend church”, told us that some “boys” had begun showing up for their Sunday services until they eventually stopped coming some time before our interviews. His church did not have any activities for them and he thought they were more interested in the food they served than in the religious services anyway:

There was a gang that used to hang around and not have anything to do, and, well, and then you start doing boyish pranks. They burned down our sign just for fun. There were some incidents like that. [He laughs.] After they had been here and had eaten our food ... They have been a subject for prayer ... but then we didn't have contact with them anymore and we wouldn't actually have anything to offer them either because we are only here on Saturdays.

Thus, the FBO youth groups in Søndre Nordstrand remained homogenous in a diverse city district at least in part because they recruited new members from existing members' families and personal networks. As the last example above illustrates, some of the FBOs struggled to accommodate other youths, even when they showed up. Although some of the youths who showed up may not have been interested in becoming part of the FBOs, but rather just passing time or looking for a nice meal, this story is one example of how the FBOs relate to the street youths.

## 7.7 How the FBOs Relate to Street Youths

As we have already noted, both adult representatives and youth focus group participants told us about boys who gathered at certain outdoor venues, whom many associated with crime and drugs, when we asked about youths at the margins or NEET young people. Despite sharing similar ideas about who these young people were, the people we interviewed understood the relation between their youth groups and the street youths differently. In this section we distinguish three different relations as they emerged from our interviews.

In one of the Church of Norway youth groups the young people saw the street youths as irrevocably different from themselves. Focus group participants from this

youth group called the street youths “refugees”, as cited earlier, and saw their church as a place where they could relax and feel safe among “people like themselves”. Kristoffer, the adult representative from the parish, told us that the youth group included very different youths, ranging from the most ambitious and popular ones at school to those who wasted their time “fooling around”. He suggested that the youth group members nevertheless saw each other as equals in relation to the “gangs” in the suburb: “They won’t say they’re racist, but they will say that they appreciate having this time with other people like themselves.”

In our focus group interview with young people from the youth group in this church one of the girls said that “[the church] means a lot to us, it is the highlight of the week and one feels safe here. And one feels like one is part of a small family.” The members of this youth group saw themselves as different from the street youths. Their use of the term “refugees” implied that the street youths came from somewhere else. The use of phrases such as “people like themselves” and being “part of a small family” suggested that the group was closed to outsiders. These phrases also evoke the idea of “equality as sameness” and the family metaphors that, according to Gullestad (2002), underpin Norwegian ethnicity.

Youth group members and street youths came across as more fluid categories in our interviews in the other FBO youth groups. The young people tended to speak of the streets as somewhere all youths could end up if they were not provided with better alternatives. When we asked the youths in the other Church of Norway youth group whether the FBOs in the city district helped youths in difficult situations, a young woman told us her own story:

I guess you can say that I am living proof that the church can help quite a lot. At least, I did not get lost. I had older leaders who did exactly what they had to do, really, and when it was needed the most. In a way they just said that ‘[i]t is OK to be here’ and in a way that ‘[e]ven if you do not feel like a Christian and believe in God right now, you are still welcome to be here and we will look after you because it is better for you to be here than for us to find you on the streets on a Friday night.’

We were told similar stories about how FBOs and their youth groups protected young people from the streets by providing alternative spaces and activities in other youth groups as well. This more preventive function, based on a view of “the streets” as a place to be avoided, was the most common understanding of the relation between FBOs and the streets. This has also been reported in other research on religious youth work in Norway (e.g. Jacobsen: 2011, 80).

One of the Muslim organisations represented a third way of relating to street youths. As mentioned above, youth group members from this mosque went out on the streets and invited youths into the mosque. This FBO reached out to street youths

to invite them into the mosque and help them change their lifestyles. Waseem, the adult representative from the mosque in our study, told us:

We try to get the young people off the streets. For example, we invite them to the mosque. That is hard enough, and it can take many attempts. When the person comes to the mosque, the person is isolated from his gang; he's off the streets. He is in another environment, in a mosque, and that does something to this person. In a way he becomes calmer, more thoughtful, doesn't have to think about what his friends will say, and so we can talk to him about our message.

Street youths were not seen as fundamentally different from youth group members and the street was not seen as posing a danger from which other youths had to be protected in this mosque. The adult representative and the youth group members saw their mosque as a place where street youths could get the help they needed. However, as was also cited in the previous section, the FBO focused on youths with "a Muslim background" rather than on youths in general. This can relate to the FBO's motivation for engaging with youths.

## 7.8 Why FBOs Engage with Youths

Much of the recent research on FBOs, and in particular on minority FBOs, has focused on their social role and contribution (e.g. Baumann: 2014; Furseth: 2008). We know less about what motivates their work. Our research shows how all the FBOs in Søndre Nordstrand share some concerns in this regard. The main purpose of their activities for and engagements with youths was to provide religious teaching and to help them shape religious identities, but not to solve social problems. Jan, a representative of a Christian majority organisation, was particularly clear on this point. His FBO, he said, did "not actively go out to offer this kind of help. Instead we focus on what is our primary task, to give the good message."

Both Christian and Muslim organisations dealt with stereotypes about their respective religion, but the stereotypes were different. Youths from Christian majority organisations told us that they were seen as different because they were Christians. For example, a young woman from the youth group in one of the Church of Norway parishes said:

[T]here has never been outright bullying, but there have been a few comments, like 'Do you believe in Jesus? Why do you bother? I've seen you on parties on Saturday nights, and if you are Christian, why were you there?'



Her example illustrates how being a Christian was seen as being at odds with mainstream Nordic youth culture (cf. Zackariasson: 2014). Yet, youths in our focus groups in both Christian and Muslim organisations suggested that being a religious person might be easier in a diverse city district such as Søndre Nordstrand than in more homogeneous Norwegian and Nordic localities. A girl from the same Church of Norway parish reported:

[I]t was more accepted in lower-secondary school, just because ... it was so common to have a religion, everybody had it, so it was more, very ... respected; just as I could say 'I will go to church on Thursday', so somebody else could say 'I will go to the mosque.' So in a way it became a totally normal thing; but now I go to upper-secondary [school] and have changed the social environment completely...<sup>13</sup>

Some of the youths thought that being a Muslim was more accepted among youths in Oslo than being a Christian, although young Muslims struggled with the perceptions of Islam they encountered. In a focus group interview in a Muslim organisation a young man said:

Ironically, I think that Christianity is stigmatised in a different way from Islam. And even if there is a lot of negative stuff on Islam in media all the time, I believe that it's not so easy to be a Christian sometimes. I think this is because, although I do not know why, but if an ethnic Norwegian meets someone from Tajikistan, he thinks that he does not really know anything about what he does, [and so he asks] 'Tell me about what you do?' I think it's a bit more like that, but if you meet a Norwegian, then it is more like, 'But we are the same, why are you in church?' And then there are all these negative things, [these] thoughts that people have about the church, I sometimes feel that Christianity is stigmatised in Norway.

The adult representatives from Muslim organisations also talked about how media portrayals of Islam affected their work. Kashif, a leader in one of the Muslim organisations, told us:

We know that media affects us a great deal and that we are fed with whatever information media wants to feed us with, and I think the biggest challenge for Muslims is that we do not manage to resist this and show who we are. We don't manage this.

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13 As mentioned earlier, places in upper-secondary school are allocated among all youths in Oslo based on applications. There is only one upper-secondary school in Søndre Nordstrand and many of the youths aged 16–19 who live in the city district attend schools in other parts of the city, including this girl.

In this context the leaders in Muslim organisations whom we interviewed emphasised that youths had to learn the traditions of their religion. Muslim youths had to learn to read Arabic and to master different interpretative strategies to read the Quran. Understanding the religious texts properly was important because Muslims are a minority in Norway and have to adapt Islamic values and traditions to a new social and political context (see also Bowen: 2012, 156–173). They also have to be able to defend their religion, which means that they had to acquire a thorough understanding of it (Østberg: 2003, 55). In one of our focus group interviews youths from a Muslim organisation believed that “identifying themselves, knowing where you stand” was one of the main challenges for young Muslims in Norway. Two of the youths said explicitly that FBOs could help mitigate this by providing knowledge:

Participant 1: Young people know little about their religion and then get insecure and don't know where they stand. The solution is to remove the problem. Give them knowledge. And this is what we try to do here.

Participant 2: We give information, we share experiences, we give advice and encourage them to take an education. We encourage them to seek knowledge because that is what Islam is about.

The adult representatives from Muslim organisations were concerned about the radicalisation of young Muslims in Western countries and elsewhere. The representatives distanced themselves from violent organisations and were eager to explain how they taught the *jihad* concept. Kashif and Masoud referred to the Quran (5, 32), which states that killing a human being is like killing all humanity. Waseem, on the other hand, told us that his organisation wanted to offer their young members a more nuanced discussion of *jihad* to keep them away from radical influences, including online communities. He argued that a nuanced discussion was important because the youths understood that the concept was used to legitimise war and their questions could not simply be ignored:

[W]e tell them, ‘yes, it is true, there is *jihad* in Islam, there is *jihad* and the only *jihad* is not what you do to yourself, there is real *jihad* as well, but let me tell you about it.’ And then we show them from Islam what Islam says about these things ... If we don't do this, it's not like they say ‘oh, well, never mind’. They go somewhere else and they will find what they are looking for.<sup>14</sup>

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14 The Norwegian anthropologist Sindre Bangstad (2016) has suggested that the Norwegian government has privileged “liberal” Muslim organisations as partners over and above more “conservative” potential partners in the “counter-radicalization” field, both when it comes to policy development

Waseem wanted the religious leaders and other adults in his FBO to use their authority to challenge inappropriate religious interpretations and lead youths away from “bad” theological influences. The leaders from the other Muslim organisations also emphasised that it was important for youths to learn how to evaluate different sources of knowledge. Imran, for example, said:

It is about teaching young people source criticism. Whose knowledge should they accept? What should they accept from the mass media and the Internet and groups like that, and how should they relate and try to find a golden middle way? In a way, this is what is at the back of our minds when we work with youth.

Our interviews also reflect how teaching religion was not only about knowledge and source criticism, but also about helping youths develop religious identities and lifestyles. Some of the representatives we interviewed described religious lifestyles as different from other lifestyles. Waseem, for example, told us that they wanted to teach young people a spiritually informed way of life:

[I]t is spirituality that we focus on, and our conviction is that this is the most important thing for people, how we behave, what our character is, and what our deeds are, [these things] are between us and God. These are the things that we talk to people about. This takes a little bit of time because it is not something that people see ... but it is something that emerges from inside.

Alain, a representative of a Christian minority organisation, suggested that he could help children and youths change their ways of life:

There are many of us who have come to Norway, many parents have lost [control of] their children. The children do not listen to the parents, the children go to the city, they steal. But our children live by God's word. We can do so for others as well. If the children come, Alain can take care of this child and teach them how the child should live. And by God's word, I can do that.

At the same time, the adult representatives emphasised that offering alternative lifestyles did not mean that the FBOs distanced themselves from mainstream Norwegian society. Especially representatives from minority FBOs emphasised that they wanted to support the welfare services and contribute to their local communi-

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and funding. Against this background, Waseem's statement can be read as a critique of how Muslim organisations like his own are treated by Norwegian authorities.

ties. For example, Masoud told us that he wanted to work with the Child Welfare Services:<sup>15</sup>

I have talked to them [the Child Welfare Services] and said that we can help as much as we can with the issues they have. At least use us as a last resource before you take the children away from their families.

The representatives argued that they helped their members become good citizens of Norway. This included acting as mediators between parents and children, as noted above; helping them find out what it meant to be religious people in Norway; and helping them integrate into other parts of society. It was important for the minority FBO representatives that their youth members got educations and found jobs. Representatives from Muslim organisations in particular reported initiatives in this field, such as the education fairs that Masoud talked about, which we mentioned earlier in this chapter. Imran told us that he was “passionate” about letting the youths in his FBO meet older members who were well educated and well integrated into Norwegian society:

This is the work that I am the most passionate about, because this will be our security in the future. We can do what we want, we can secure our borders, we can do this and do that, but we are ourselves our security; this means including our young people, and telling them that they are a part of society and that they are society, because then we avoid the problem of people who drop out and become a subculture.

The main purpose of FBOs’ engagement with the youth was to pass on religious beliefs, values and identities, and to make religion accessible in a secular context. The FBOs’ youth work can be described as pedagogical in that it was passing on knowledge, traditions and values, and as apologetic in that it was preparing young people to defend their religion in an environment where stereotypes about religions and religious people flourish. Most of the FBOs had no activities or engagements focused on street youths, but rather focused on working with the youths they saw as “their” young people. They wanted to contribute to their young members’ success in Norwegian society. Even though they were interested in youths in general and aware of youths on the margins of their communities, they did not see it as

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15 The Norwegian Child Welfare Services has been the subject of several rounds of public criticism, particularly for taking over custody of children too easily. A number of cases involving immigrant families have gained widespread media coverage in Norway and internationally recent years, and a number of cases have been brought to the European Court of Human Rights. This has led to low levels of trust between the Child Welfare Services and immigrants and minority groups.

their responsibility to address this particular social problem (see also Holte: 2018b, 71–79).

## 7.9 Conclusion

The aim of this case study was to describe FBOs' activities for and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand and to analyse whether the FBOs contributed to social cohesion through their youth work. Although most of the people we interviewed spoke warmly of the communities in their suburbs, our interviews also reflected divisions among the youths in Søndre Nordstrand. Most of the youths and adult representatives we interviewed expressed that they wanted the youths affiliated with their organisations to avoid the streets. Thus, there was a sense among the members of the different FBOs as “us” and the street youths as “them”. The FBOs provided activities and meeting places for their young members, including those who were not interested in football or other sports, as a form of “sanctuary haven in a heartless world” (Coleman: 2003, 38). In this way the FBOs provided some youths with spaces where they could build trust and help each other, but mostly in rather homogeneous groups. Because the FBOs recruited youths through their members' families and personal networks, the youths in the different FBOs tended to share similar backgrounds as well as certain lifestyle choices. It is likely that they “consider[ed] themselves as more or less the same” (Gullestad: 2002, 46). Only one of the FBOs reached out to street youths to integrate them into the organisation. This FBO acted to bridge the social divide between “us” and “them”, even though the activities did not aim to reach beyond the borders of the religious community. Thus, this FBO also engaged with youths on a principle of religious sameness. Overall, the FBOs' activities for and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand reflected – and hereby contributed to upholding – differences and divisions in the local communities, which may have impacted negatively on the cohesion of the communities and the city district as wholes (cf. Chapter 4).

Another perspective is that segregated activities for minority youths can contribute to social cohesion “by creating a new more encompassing identity that is adapted to the society in which they live” (Walseth: 2016, 96). Shaping identities – including religious identities – can be a precondition for developing the trust and respect for diversity that social cohesion may also require. The same goes for the work to prevent theological and political extremism in some of the Muslim organisations in Søndre Nordstrand. Yet the youths and adult representatives we interviewed were conscious that the religious lifestyles promoted by their FBOs could be seen as different from other Norwegian lifestyles; both Christian and Muslim youths told us about the negative perceptions of religion and religious people they encountered. Against this backdrop, several of the adult representatives empha-

sised that they promoted values that were compatible with mainstream Norwegian society. Especially the representatives from the Muslim organisations emphasised how they promoted participation in mainstream Norwegian society, for example, in education. The FBOs did not generally foster shared identities related to the local communities, but rather different religious identities that they said promoted certain forms of participation. In this way, both the youths and the adult representatives we interviewed argued for broader understandings of what we could call “Norwegianness” than Norwegian ethnicity underpinned by sameness, metaphors of home and family life, and Lutheran Christianity (see also Thun: 2012; Walseth: 2016). With higher levels of tolerance and respect for diversity, a single shared identity may not be so important for social cohesion. Promoting participation and a shared sense of belonging may then be all the more important.

When the representatives of the minority FBOs claimed that their teaching aimed to help the youths develop as good citizens, when they said they worked to promote their young members’ success in school and working life, and when they emphasised that they wanted to support the welfare services and their local communities, this may have been a way of conveying that their organisations promoted participation and were legitimate social agents in Norway. The minority FBOs did not promote “assimilation” or contribute to “sameness” in their local communities. Rather, they supported their youths in developing distinct identities, while still promoting a sense of belonging and different forms of participation (cf. Thun: 2012; Walseth: 2016).

Even though the population in Søndre Nordstrand was diverse, the FBO youth groups were more homogenous. The youth groups in both minority and majority FBOs had strong senses of an “us”. The FBOs engaged with youths primarily to pass on their religion. Protecting their young members from the streets and other influences they saw as bad was another major reason for having youth groups. The FBOs’ activities for and engagements with youths in Søndre Nordstrand may have promoted social cohesion through their influence on the youths who participated in them. However, most of the FBO youth groups did little to include street youths, and their contribution to building social trust and social participation was therefore selective. In many of the FBOs, we encountered a sense of the street youths as others – as “them”, which may have contributed to pushing these youths further into the margins of the local communities. The contribution to social cohesion of the FBOs’ activities with and engagements for youths in Søndre Nordstrand was therefore ambiguous: the FBOs could be seen as contributing to the exclusion as well as the inclusion of different groups of youths.