

BYSTOCK COURT

The reasons for Communities coming into being are legion, but perhaps the objectives are not always clear at the outset. This was certainly true when six people decided to purchase a large white elephant of a mansion with 24 acres of grounds, just outside Exmouth below Woodbury Common. The house, of some sixty rooms, had been on the market for ten years and no useful commercial or residential use could be found for it; it was very well built and in good repair, for it had only been erected in 1907, after a fire. Decoratively it was bad, and the grounds overgrown and neglected for 20 years. An elderly lady and her daughter had been the sole occupants for many years, retreating to the end of the house.

The Charity was formed because it had become clear that people undergoing one or more of the strains and pressures of modern society could best be helped if people lived in closer proximity. Involvement meant being available when needed and not by appointment. A person in a deep state of depression may need to chat at 11 o'clock at night and not at 11 in the morning when it best suits the counsellor. Even though the talk may not take place, the sick person has a feeling of security that somebody is available.

The original conception was quite simple. Just as a man wrapped up in himself makes a small parcel, so too a family is a small unit if engrossed only in its own family affairs. Why not an enlarged family comprising four foundation families who could welcome those requiring support for a while. The need for this was first realised when a Congregational Church in Exeter helped a lady gain custody of her children after a marital breakdown. The members found a terrace house in need of modernisation. They worked like beavers, installing modern sanitation, re-wiring, decorating and furnishing the house. The lady was duly installed with her children and the church sat back thinking it had done its job. However, this was the time the mother required support and friendship more than ever; with confidence destroyed by a husband who had dominated her and decried her abilities she was finding it hard to start life again with one of her children still not yet of school age. How much simpler it would be for her to go out and work if she were living in a community and the children could be cared for in her absence.

When the six adult members of this Community moved into Bystock Court in July 1965 with their twelve children, they had little idea who their clientele would be and from whence they would come. Certainly they never expected the influx of children that soon arrived. From the start, however, mothers undergoing some form of marriage breakdown, or the unmarried mum or the prisoner's wife sought shelter with us. Conversion of the smaller rooms at the northern end of the house into units for mothers with children was the first task to be tackled. It seemed essential to give the broken family quarters of its own to enable the children to retain what was left of the family entity. Complete absorption into the larger community would, it was felt, be too disturbing for the children. Nine units were gradually formed comprising a combined kitchen/living room with one or more bedrooms as might be needed. The Community joins together for cups of coffee or tea, and family prayers, which are, of course, optional, are held both morning and evening. Perhaps it is at the evening session when the house is most knit together in companionship after the children are in bed. The T.V. and quiet rooms bring the Community together as well as the swimming pool and outings to the beach and other places. We have up to six single men and women who use the house as a halfway home back to face life again after marital breakdowns, family rejections or convalescence. As a matter of policy it has been decided to restrict the number of guests to fifteen, plus children. It is recognised that should the numbers increase then the enlarged family concept would be lost and an institution be formed. This small number would not be economic if salaries were paid to the staff; as it is, all work is done voluntarily. The guiding principle throughout is how would the normal Christian family behave. The staff members are mostly gainfully employed outside, giving of their spare time to the running of the Community.

It took three years to paint the outside of the house, but this was done with the help of work camps organised by the World Council of Churches in Geneva, the Christian Education Movement, groups from local churches and others. The mansion had to be re-wired, so a local Post Office engineer tackled the job with the help of University students and a retired Engineer. He spent weekends for nearly two years on this task. The plumbing had to be renewed and adapted for the units, and the alterations carried out. In this, prisoners from the local open prison and a building surveyor from an Exeter office came at weekends to lend a hand.

Living in community is never easy, especially if people are depressed, insecure or inadequate. But it is made easier if the burden is shared by all. Counselling is not the sole responsibility of the warden or staff but a form of group therapy takes place. It is a relief and joy to find somebody who has overcome their own problem begin to shoulder somebody else's worry. Recently this occurred when an ex-miner who has been at Bystock Court over four years undertook, at the request of our local doctor, the teaching of cane work to two sick, comparatively young men who were depressed at being confined to their houses, one having had a lung removed and the other hit by sclerosis. The former miner has had a history of social and mental disturbance over the last twenty or more years, dating from the time when he had an accident at the pit face burying him for many hours, and then his wife and little son leaving him. When he first came to Bystock the least upset meant he would walk out, and there can be few mental homes in the South West that he had not visited. To think that group therapy and the security of a normal home life can bring about such a change is not really a miracle but just applied common sense - however, it is a comfort to know that it can work in this way.

Folk come for no fixed length of stay. Sometimes it is only for a night's shelter, but we have had a mother with four children for over four years. They move when the problem is resolved although alternative housing is now becoming increasingly difficult.

The registered charity is a company limited by guarantee. The property was purchased by private loans on mortgage and is now debt-free. It is supported by 340 members who pay an annual subscription of £1 or more. Otherwise, the main source of revenue is from the payments for accommodation by those resident, for example, a unit for a mother is £4 per week, and full board for a single person £8, which is the figure agreed with the Department of Health and Social Security. The only grant received is £250 from the Devon County Council. We feel this gives us an air of respectability, more than financial support, especially when the warden is testifying in court, perhaps trying to obtain a probation order rather than a sentence for some unfortunate person. The fact that the County Council actually gives us a grant means status, even though the house has been described as a ghetto - and in other disparaging terms at times - by those always willing to criticise! Our clients in fact come mainly from the social workers, probation officers, ministers, doctors and the Samaritans.

The principal rooms at the Southern end of the mansion, with the ballroom and vast bedrooms are used for weekend youth groups up to about 26 strong, who come for study conferences or work or just holidays. The grounds are ideal for camping and each year the local school for the deaf camp, with others. The churches who have used the house for their purposes have found the benefit to the fellowship enormous - they cater for themselves and no charge is made (a contribution to funds is not strongly resisted!). Far greater use could be made of the house for this purpose to the benefit of all denominations - we are essentially ecumenical and our chapel is used by all. The local parish church meets each Sunday morning for coffee after Eucharist. The local United Reformed Churches hold a joint Covenant Sunday in May.

The 24 acres are slowly being reclaimed. Three Nature Trails are being formed for educational use by the local schools. On the former cricket pitch we have cows, calves and a pony grazing. A Pet's Corner is planned for the children for many have never had the chance to enjoy them.

As you enter the house you will see on the far wall a frame in which the following words are written:

And the Lord said
"Behold I have set aside this house, and have blessed it,
That it may become a resting place
And a refuge for the weary.
Peace is to be found within its walls,
And friendship,
All who cross the threshold shall find a welcome,
And a comforting hand to give fresh courage
In place of dark despair.
In this house shall My Name be glorified,
For that which is shattered
Shall be made whole".

This quotation aptly describes the spirit which is being fostered within the walls of the Court. It is not just a large house - it is a home, a Christian home.

(Bystock Court is situated at Withycombe, Exmouth, Devon. Tel: Exmouth 6605.