

The Circle Trust

(CENTRE FOR DISCHARGED PRISONERS)

by

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AFTER MANY MONTHS of discussion both with professional social workers and with criminals the Circle Trust came into being on 24th May, 1964. This was the day when the club was opened in the Victoria area of London. The premises had been given to the Trust by the Westminster City Council and the decorating had been done by two inmates of Wandsworth Prison under the International Voluntary Service Scheme, and now we were ready to provide a place for all discharged prisoners, male and female, where they could relax, somewhere for them to go in their free time, a shelter from the cold and the rain, a pleasant change from their lodgings and some security from the rest of the community which appears always to be at war with the inadequate offender.

Although the premises were adequate the Committee were unanimous that high standards were a 'must' if we were to be successful in combating the usual approach of the do-gooders and providing a second-best. The second-best always seems good enough for

prisoners. None of us knew what function the club was going to fulfil. We would have to learn as we went on; we would have to live and feel with the men and women inside this little society and would have to help them to organise their club. What would this new approach offer to our members? An anchor of security? A society tailored to their measure where, at their own pace, they could grow up and mature and perhaps with enough time and with real love and concern, adapt themselves with all their shortcomings to this hard competitive world where poverty and lack of ability are offences in themselves.

The Club

Situated at 16, Moreton Street, S.W.1., the house is open every weekday from 5 p.m. until 11 p.m., and on Saturdays and Sundays from 2—11 p.m. On the premises the members can take part in the usual club activities—darts, cards, a piano is provided, a television set, a kitchen where meals are served every night (members pay for their food) and a hobby room

where they can make flowers, toys and other things reminiscent of their hobby classes inside. The running of the club is largely shared by two of us; we can cook a meal or watch T.V. or perhaps play darts, or we can be listening to some lengthy life story or perhaps trying to find a bed at 10 p.m., at night when all other social work agencies have been shut for hours.

The club is run on the basis of a "Members' Meeting." At the monthly meeting registered members are asked to attend and club affairs are discussed freely. All suggestions are put on trial for a month and are approved or rejected or altered if need be at the next meeting. "How do you become a member?" The final decision was the result of six consecutive meetings when constant changes were made; the fears and animosity of the existing members were worked through and at last it was agreed that the following procedure could be put into force:

Prospective members are referred to the Secretary of the Club by any recognised after-care agency, some are introduced by members themselves (the old boy network works as efficiently on this basis as it does on any other). Applicants are interviewed by the Secretary and after mutual agreement they are able to use the club for a period of six weeks during which time both the members and the prospective members are able to assess each other to see if they fit in. After this time the member's

name is proposed to the meeting, seconded and accepted or rejected. The applicant then becomes a fully fledged member. They pay an annual subscription of five shillings and have gained the right to vote on all internal club matters. If an applicant is not found suitable he or she will be told the reason why and what a rejected applicant should do in order to be acceptable to us, and a further trial period will be given to them. No one has, as yet, been barred from membership. We have noticed that physical appearance plays a great part and where a man is physically unpleasant to look at or badly dressed, this is a deterrent and other members are very critical. It is interesting to watch the gradual change and improvement in the standard of physical appearance when a person really wishes to become a member and to become part of and belong to the club. In our short experience during ten months we have learned how great the need is for a 24-hour service of what one would describe as "just being there." Indeed this is all the members want—some-where to go, someone they know to be always available to listen to their troubles or successes. When a man attends the club regularly he does gain confidence in the assurance that 'the club' is there. Our small research has proved that 90 per cent of our members change their job or digs on average every three weeks! In this constant moving the club becomes the only

stable unit they know. They rely on it and use the address for mail or phone calls and use our name as a reference.

The membership being still small there exists a strong solidarity amongst the members. Mealtime provides an easy opportunity for discussing problems. They help each other by mutual experience and advice. They often offer practical help by finding jobs or clothes for one another.

The most positive action the group has taken was the setting up of a fund. This fund was suggested and has been organised by the members. Money is always the major problem and they decided that if a member is short of money by reason of sickness or sudden loss of work, this fund will be available to them to loan money and tide them over a difficult period. All people using the fund will have to repay the first loan before being able to use the fund again. A special finance committee was set up and it is this committee who decide if money is going to be lent and how much it is to be. There is a feeling amongst members that this fund should be used primarily in providing the first week's rent for a room. The dread of all members is to have to use hostels, they are most unpopular with nearly all men and women discharged from prison. Another positive element in this experiment is the assurance for members that this unit will stand by them through all their crises.

We do not profess to change men, we do not think that because a man joins this club he will necessarily alter his ways. But we do hope that perhaps he may learn the great value of "communication." If a member has been able to use the club during a few weeks when all is well, he does not feel so despondent when things go wrong and he needs help. He can retain his self respect, the first step to self-help. He will accept expert advice if need be, because every one of the members knows that these "ups and downs" are a part of the group's life and no one is going to moralise or ask awkward questions. The freewill of a man to remain within the group at any time without compulsion is a first step to readjustment. We feel that to maintain this relationship the club must remain fairly small. With new premises we could take 200 members. The general attendance now with 44 members is in the region of 8—10 a night. There is a small nucleus who are there every night, but most use the club once or twice a week. They all, however, keep in close contact with the club by telephone; a number is available to all members covering 24 hours a day. After ten months of experience I think I can safely say that the knowledge that help is available at all times relieves panic, a situation in which most men find themselves when things go wrong, and it is often when panic sets in that men commit further offences.

Many of the members, of course, are non-criminals; some are members because in their jobs they are in contact with discharged prisoners, this particularly so for probation officers and Assistant Governors. A few are men and women who have a desire to help their fellow men and are particularly interested in the problems of the recidivist. This mixing of criminals and non-criminals prevents the club from becoming a small prison outside. It gives the members an opportunity to pick and choose their own friends. We have insisted on a mixed male and female attendance to offset the all-male influence of prison. The influence of women in the club improves the situation from all points of view. It is interesting to see how bad language and other unpleasant traits of prison life drop away in the company of women.

It is too early to say if this experiment will prove useful, but

it provides an opportunity for exploration into the behaviour of the long-term offender in freedom. It certainly leads all those who are prepared to open their eyes and minds to new approaches; to see how inadequately men are prepared in prison to face the outside battle, some have not thought about it until the day the door shuts behind them. But we hope that the dialogue which starts between the club and a member will enable these men and women to be infiltrated back into life's mainstream if their freedom is ever to be anything but a temporary and unbearable burden.

The object of the club is simple and undogmatic, to learn more about the men's difficulties, and to support the members firmly but unsentimentally in their efforts to start to live again after in some cases 20 years of inertia and scepticism.

RESIDENT STAFF REQUIRED

WARDEN & WIFE R.C. Hostel for borstal boys (8 boys)

WARDEN & WIFE R.C. Hostel for discharged prisoners (16 men)

ASSISTANT WARDENS for both Hostels

Social training preferable but not essential

Please apply stating qualifications and reason for application to:
The Society of St. Dismas, 40 Winn Road, Southampton