

After Care and the St. Leonard's Housing Association

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"THE MAINTENANCE of strong family ties, we are confident, is of the utmost importance in planning for the rehabilitation of offenders." Few would refute these words of Lord Stonham, spoken in the House of Lords last November. Yet, if a family has no roof over its head or is split up under several roofs, as may be the case if the children are in care of a local authority, how can such ties possibly be maintained?

It was this consideration which brought into being the St. Leonard's Housing Association three years ago with the specific objective of providing good accommodation for a temporary period at reasonable economic rents for selected ex-prisoners, their wives and children.

The need for this provision needs no emphasis. Almost everyone experiences difficulty these days in finding furnished flats or houses but for the ex-prisoner and his family this is particularly difficult. He probably has no claim on a housing list; he will have no means of paying an exorbitant rent; he will very likely find him-

self a marked man and have difficulty in gaining employment. What chance has he of reuniting his family and making a home for them? If he lacks a home and the support of a united family and is frustrated in his attempts to give his dependants what he feels is their due, it is not very surprising if he succumbs to other pressures and returns to crime as "the easy way out".

The St. Leonard's Housing Association, therefore, sets out to provide houses and flats which offer civilized amenities and are provided with basic furniture and equipment; they are freshly decorated to look inviting and cheerful. They are inevitably small, for otherwise the rent which would have to be charged would put them beyond the reach of those for whom they are intended. Besides, it is not the intention that the families should settle down in them for life; the idea is that they should provide a stepping stone to something more permanent.

To help reduce the overall cost and allow the association to keep

rents as low as possible, it makes use of voluntary labour, where it can, in carrying out the repair, conversion and decoration of the houses it acquires. Apart from the financial value of this there is also the social value. The Prison Department of the Home Office is prepared to let selected serving prisoners assist in a voluntary capacity in this work at week-ends. Thus each working party consisting of university students, members of church youth groups, nurses in training and members of work camp organizations, also includes serving prisoners. An important aspect of this scheme is that it reduces the prisoners' feeling of isolation, helps to boost their self respect and hope for the future, and gives them an opportunity to retain or develop their skills. They may not personally ever occupy one of the association's premises, but at least they know that something is being done to help their fellow prisoners. They are given an opportunity to meet and talk with students and other volunteers on equal terms and to assist in a worthwhile project. At the same time the other volunteers in the party gain some insight into the minds and lives of the prisoners which cannot fail to have a broadening and humanizing effect upon them.

Of course, bricks and mortar alone cannot ensure that the ex-prisoner will not resort to further crime or that his family will remain united. Much of his life may have been spent in institutions; he may

not have learned to accept the give and take of family life. Both he and his wife may suffer from instability resulting, in the husband's case very often, in an inability to hold a job down for long. His wife may be incapable of managing a house on an uncertain income or even of spending a regular income to the best advantage. Immaturity, lack of training and skill in home management, ill-health and nervous strain lead to family neglect and breakdown. Work of rehabilitation by trained social workers has, therefore, to be carried out with such families not only during their tenancy but often before they set up again as a family. This can begin with the husband while he is still in prison and with the wife and children wherever they are living prior to his rejoining them. In this way some preparation can be made for the new life which faces both of them and a foundation is laid upon which they can be helped to build in the future.

So the St. Leonard's Housing Association not only provides a house but also the essential social support the tenants need, either through or in conjunction with the Probation and After Care Service, which is the responsible statutory body. In north-east London, where the association's work first began, the Family Service Unit has also brought its skill to bear.

Although it has been necessary to adapt Family Service Unit case work techniques to the special needs of the ex-prisoner reunited

with his family, generally speaking the difficulties encountered bear close resemblance to those faced by social workers everywhere. The main source of difficulty seems to be found in their reactions to asking for and receiving help. This is well illustrated by the following extract from a report to the association from the Family Service Unit workers: "A family will suddenly be thrown together again with all its old problems and some new ones too. Money is short; work has to be found; children have to be cared for; a home has to be built. Sometimes the offer of a tenancy is the first real chance the family has had—the stakes are high. Added to this, as the prisoner looks forward desperately to the date of his release, freedom is often thought of in terms of independence from scrutiny and supervision. Society also cherishes an anxious hope that the prisoner may 'stand on his own feet', so that even when help is offered realistically to the family and accepted, a good deal of strong feeling is likely to exist among its members. Such people, like anyone else, have varying capacities to handle this within themselves, and varying methods of doing so. Some adopt the policy of a passive defensive attitude, taking everything for granted, others exhibit a brittle facade of appearing to cope whilst in fact escaping crucial unresolved difficulties; another in its very collapse may be taking a step towards greater ultimate stability. We have very recently seen a

husband throw up a job he had with his brother, placing his family in great financial difficulty. But we had also noticed how he had been using his brother's existence in the house to avoid facing up to his wife and his marriage on which the future must rest. What looked like a step back was in fact a step forward".

Here the association is faced with a dilemma. The homeless ex-prisoner and his family, who require a long period of care before stability can be achieved, are the people most in need of assistance. But, as already explained, the association's scheme has a short-term objective—to provide temporary accommodation—as well as long term objectives. It is difficult to reconcile these, especially if the need for long term care manifests itself in irregular rent payment, for the viability of the scheme depends very much on the regular receipt of rents. In these cases the association has to find points of tolerance between its obligations as a landlord and its avowed purpose of making a significant contribution in the field of rehabilitation. No complete solution to this problem is possible; each case has to be assessed on its own merits and so the association has sometimes to be more limiting in its choice of tenants than it really wishes to be.

Apart from making use of specialized family case work help in its rehousing scheme, the association also encourages interested and sympathetic neighbours to befriend the families it accom-

modates as well as to accept responsibility for practical service in the way of making flats or houses ready for tenancy.

In north-east London, where the scheme has been running the longest, such a group of interested people came into being as a result of what might otherwise have been considered a completely negative happening. The tenants of one of the flats decided to have a little party and accordingly they invited their friends of former days. There was no alternative, for they were the only friends they had. The final result was a celebration on a grand scale which ended in a fight in the street in the early hours of a suburban Sunday morning. There was a great commotion and many of the neighbours were up in arms against the family and the association for having introduced them into their midst. One local inhabitant, however, remained outside the general clamour—the offending family's next door neighbour. She adopted the attitude that regrettable though the incident was, she and the rest of the community were partly responsible, for they had done nothing to prevent it by befriending the family and making them feel at home in their new and, in many respects, strange environment. She immediately set about gathering around her a group of sympathetic and understanding local people who were prepared in future to rectify this shortcoming. The "Friends of St. Leonards", as this group is now known, and the trained social workers complement

each other in their after care effort.

The work of the association in north-east London no longer represents its full activity. As its service has grown, it has been necessary to decentralize the day to day management of its property and set up branch committees to undertake this. Apart from the committee in north-east London, there is a second in south-west Midlands and a third in Lincolnshire. Others are likely to be set up in the near future.

The branch in London is the oldest and, while each one will surely develop its own character and to that extent vary from the rest, as the first, it inevitably constitutes a model. In June 1964 the Beacontree Branch Committee, as it is called, was formed to take over management of the initial properties in north-east London and to develop this unit to its planned strength of 20 homes. This committee represents the professional, religious, business, local government and voluntary interests of the community and as an indication of its enthusiasm and drive it already has seven properties in its care. One is in process of conversion into two flats, one is in preparation for occupation by a single family, and the remaining five are already in full use. Nine families are at present in occupation and already some are showing very encouraging signs of a return to stability. Reactions on entry vary but one tenant was so delighted by the quality of his flat that he soon set about laying out

the garden. Moreover, his wife asked if there was anything she could do to help the scheme. As her own contribution to the community, she is now caring for a small coloured child while its parents are at work.

The skilful selection of the tenants is vital to the success of the scheme. In Beacontree, the Principal Probation Officer, the east London Family Service Unit Organiser and the Hon. Secretary of the association form a selection board which considers applications from prison welfare officers and other sources. The demand for homes is far, far greater than the supply of houses and often the most needy families have to be turned down because it seems

unlikely that they will be able to respond to the chance being offered them. The present limitations of the scheme—few houses mostly in fairly well-to-do districts at higher rents than the average ex-prisoner can easily afford—make this unfortunately necessary. This must be discouraging both to those requiring accommodation and to those trying so desperately to find it for them. Until more and more new branches are formed and the money is forthcoming to obtain many more houses, this frustrating situation will remain, but a beginning has at last been made and it is hoped that when the scheme becomes more widely known its progress will be accelerated and its service rapidly increased.

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