



THE

STORY

of

S.H.A.R.E.

JESUS
SUMMONED THE
TWELVE AND
BEGAN TO SEND
THEM OUT
TWO BY TWO.



then became inevitable for them. They have lifted Him out of the pages of history and brought Him alive as it were. They certainly believe that Christ lives. They have no doubt at all about His Promised Land. It is this conviction of theirs that spills over onto the young and inoculates them with a new sense of direction as they continue their search for meaning.

The call that we hear through scripture of "Set my people free" - free from all that enslaves or demeans the human spirit; free from the prison of our low sense of self worth; free to release the goodness and the giftedness that lies buried in many people; that call to set His people free is as relevant today as it ever was.

Our dream for the 21st. Century and the reasons for hope

The cry of the poor is louder today than ever. There is a temptation to despair. But there are compelling reasons for hope; and nowhere is the evidence of this hope more tangible than in the City of Cork. Where else are there more voluntary groups? Where else are more generous hearted people? they make sacrifices to help the poor of the third world; they make sacrifices to help the poor among us at home.

But perhaps it is in our young people that we find our greatest source of hope. The people of Cork have been privileged to witness at first hand the idealism of a cross-section of their young people. Their capacity for sustained unselfish effort is a revelation. We sometimes misunderstand our young people. We sometimes regard them as wayward. But offer them a challenge in the context of their sense of fair play, justice for all and respect for the human person and no sacrifice is too great to make, no task too demanding. One does not easily get used to their generosity of heart.

Drawing from and leaning on the faith and wisdom of the older people, the young will stay the course. Let us continue then with their enthusiastic collaboration to build a society that is vision driven, not problem pulled, where people are motivated by love, not stifled by selfishness.

THE STORY OF S.H.A.R.E.

The late 1960s was a time of student revolt in the western world. Young people especially, were unhappy if not disillusioned with authority, both civil and religious. Anger, even hostility, was very much in evidence.

Irish youth did not escape the turmoil. They too were searching for relevance in their lives. Where many saw this as a time of crisis, others saw it as an opportunity. Against this backdrop a workshop on Christian Leadership was organised by the Headmaster, Presentation Brothers College Cork in 1970. The workshop accommodated the students during the school day and their parents at evening time, the entire exercise being facilitated by former communist and editor of *The Daily Worker*, Douglas Hyde. The process adopted involved plenary sessions with input, question-and-answer and challenge. In group sessions, the students were issued with questions which provoked debate, discussion, research, decision and feedback. Their positive approach made the exercise a very productive "think tank". In his role as facilitator, Douglas Hyde dispelled their misconceptions, unlocked their frustrations and channelled their energies into reaching out to people in need. He appealed to their "obvious idealism" and focused their attention on immediate practical realities.

At the end of the three-day workshop, senior students went out into the nearby old-city, in twos and threes, to discover and experience at first-hand what these realities were and then to decide how to address the issues involved. There they found old people wasting away in depressing attic rooms or in tiny basement flats – longing to talk but having no one to listen; they found that these senior citizens dreaded the cold that benumbs a frail body and that the old, poised between hope and despair, felt useless, unwanted, fearful, insecure and forgotten.

Instead of bemoaning the plight of these homeless elderly and seeking scapegoats for the indignity to which they were condemned, these Cork teenagers took a proactive approach which is still characteristic of them and

decided to do something about the deplorable living conditions. They were determined to bring a glimmer of hope to the lives of the elderly poor, seeking ways of having the injustices corrected and then putting preventive (protective) structures in place.

At first, their efforts were confined to decorating and repairing homes. However, they soon realised that an organisation of large proportions, commensurate financial assistance and adult support and involvement were required to tackle an ever-widening picture of need. From there on, the help of their families, friends and the community at large, was asked for and given. The embryonic movement then came to birth and was to be known thereafter as S.H.A.R.E. This name, the result of a competition to name the organisation, was chosen as it had the greatest appeal. Words were supplied for the letters of the abbreviation, i.e. **S**tudents **H**arness **A**id for the **R**elief of the **E**lderly.

A question of financial resources was a priority. It was decided to appeal to the public. A decision was made to erect a Crib in the city's main thoroughfare, Patrick Street, with a view to bringing to public awareness the plight of the very poor of Cork. "No room at the Inn" was an apt description of those in the cold, damp and dreary conditions of neighbour citizens in their own city. It would remind people of what Christmas really means. A suggestion at this time that they undertake a Fast at the Crib was received with acclaim. The students were convinced that in this way the people would be alerted to the urgency of the cause and would be influenced to respond generously. Permission was readily granted by the City Fathers to proceed as planned and a section of the large pedestrian crossing in the centre of the main thoroughfare was deemed to be strategically best suited.

Christmas 1970 then saw S.H.A.R.E. Members gather around their make-shift Crib in the city's busy street. What started then as a thirty-hour Fast has since been increased to an eight-day one. Groups of 5th. and 6th. Year boys do a 24-hour vigil while the girls and the younger boys do shorter periods while fasting at the Crib.

The Crib too has been changed. The original was replaced with a 12' high log structure made from specially selected timber which came from the woods of

Papers on various aspects of the theme were prepared and presented by three of the S.H.A.R.E. teenagers, as well as by experts from the various disciplines involved.

Sheltered Housing

Here the residents enjoy security, privacy, integrated community living and a wide range of added amenities made possible by the large numbers involved.

The first sheltered houses, Dún Rís at Grattan Street, were opened by President Patrick Hillary in December 1988. They comprise a thirty-two-house complex. Its design won for the Architect, Neil Hegarty, a Gold Medal and the National Building of the Year Award for 1989.

In 1992, the Presentation Brothers made a gift to the senior citizens of Cork of two-thirds of their headquarters' building at Mount St. Joseph, Blarney Street. The gift included more than five acres of grounds and walks. Its forty apartments, residents' restaurant, Creative Activity Centre and recreation rooms have made it S.H.A.R.E.'s biggest undertaking to date. This was opened by President Mary Robinson in November 1993 and incorporated the 200th S.H.A.R.E. accommodation.

That figure will be further increased when S.H.A.R.E. has completed its new Resource Services Centre, off Sheare Street. This new centre will cater for the needs of all of the senior citizens living alone in the centre of the city, as well as S.H.A.R.E.'s own residents – a total of close on 400 people.

The complex will also incorporate S.H.A.R.E.'s third sheltered housing unit, with accommodation for in excess of 15 apartments.

Handing on the Faith

It was Abraham Lincoln who said that duty in the abstract never inspires anyone, but duty to a person beloved is the strongest, most natural force in the world. The older people discovered the truth of that maxim for themselves through their relationship with the Carpenter's Son of Nazareth. It was their understanding of the love of Jesus of the Gospels for each person that sustained them in life. Following Him

S.H.A.R.E. was also honoured by being chosen to exhibit its work in the special Exhibition Train that went on tour to the Capitals of Europe later that year, promulgating the plight of the older people.

Raising awareness of the plight of the senior citizens living alone in Ireland

Thirty-two S.H.A.R.E. boys and girls participated in a six-day jog around Ireland, which they organised to highlight the plight of the elderly living alone in the country as well as in the towns and cities. They were formally received by the Mayors of Limerick, Galway and Dublin, as well as by the Taoiseach in Leinster House and by Cardinal Ó Fiach in Armagh. The highlight of their pilgrimage was the special Mass of Thanksgiving celebrated on their behalf by the Custodian of Knock Shrine, Mons. James Horan.

Other Pilgrimages

A pilgrimage worthy of particular mention was one of a number to Lourdes organised by S.H.A.R.E. Here, schools from every county financed the cost of sending at least one senior citizen from the county on this special five-day effort. A feature of the pilgrimage was that at least one teenager and one S.H.A.R.E. Mother accompanied each senior citizen. One hundred and seventy people travelled in the specially-chartered 'plane.

Choosing the most deserving person from each county acted as a catalyst in alerting the young people to the conditions of the old who were living alone in their area. That exercise of visiting those living alone sensitised the young to a reality of life to which they were oblivious. Many acted on that experience and set up structures that guaranteed regular visitation of the elderly by the young people of the area. The teenagers accompanied the old as they tried to cope with the challenges on the final leg of life's pilgrimage.

The role of the family in the care of the Elderly

A two-day conference on The Role of the Family in the Care of the Elderly, was organised by S.H.A.R.E. in 1994. It was financed by the European Union Offices, Brussels and was attended by representatives of seven European Countries, the West Indies and Canada, in addition to a large attendance from all parts of Ireland.

Gougane Barra. From there also came St. Finbarr, Cork City's Founding Father. Its design is a replica of a 15th. century Irish Crib. At the back of the Crib is a 20' high platform on which an 8' neon lighted star stands. Every few seconds this Star of Bethlehem, the symbol of hope, alternating as a cross, the symbol of suffering, beams its messages up and down the busy street.

There was no room at the Inn for Jesus. Being poor, all that Mary and Joseph could provide for Him was a stable and a manger. They were alone in the dark.

The work of S.H.A.R.E. realises these messages. Now there is room in the Inn for the poor. The wise men, women and young people of Cork follow the star, still bringing their gifts; the shepherds and shepherdesses come to show their respect; thousands of Cork people bring their gold, frankincense and myrrh; thousands of young people bring good tidings. Thus, all minister to the same Jesus in the person of the elderly – "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

From 1970-1972 the work was largely on a project basis during the Christmas and Easter seasons, when S.H.A.R.E. continued as it began, cleaning and decorating the homes of the elderly in the old city. Then in 1973 the organisation became more streamlined. Visitation of the elderly was given greater emphasis and fund-raising became a priority.

In a major policy decision S.H.A.R.E. decided to discontinue repairing the rooms of the poor, because those they had repaired influenced landlords to increase the rents, and in some cases the occupants had no choice but to seek cheap lodgings elsewhere. They decided instead to bank their takings from the annual Fast until such time as they would have accumulated enough money (£7,000) to gain credibility and to influence the co-operation of Local and Central Government with a view to building proper homes in keeping with human dignity for these old people.

It was an extremely difficult decision to take – to stop repairing and wait until £7,000 was accumulated – to bank money given for the poor while the poor lived in poverty and want!

Then in 1975 the City Manager of the day, Mr. T.J. McHugh, who identified with their aspirations and supported and encouraged their efforts from the beginning, influenced the Corporation to give a site in the old city on which some houses could be built for senior citizens. Except for a nominal Government Grant totalling £3,000, the twelve houses built were financed by S.H.A.R.E.

From 1970 to 1977, the attention of S.H.A.R.E. was confined to the elderly poor who inhabited the attic haunts of the Marsh Area – Cork's old city. In 1978, the focus of attention was extended to those in the older areas in the north side of the city and then in 1980 attention was also given to those south of the river.

Laundry

Around this time, the boys realised that access to a Laundry service was central to the comfort of the elderly. They put a laundry in place and gradually discovered the requirements of running one efficiently. Collecting, labelling, sorting and delivering were time-consuming activities. In October 1978 the boys found it necessary to engage a lady on a part-time basis to help operate the machinery. The imaginatively designed delivery system by bicycle became well-known around the Marsh as the boys collected and delivered the laundry.

A new S.H.A.R.E. house at last

Each new S.H.A.R.E. house is a three-roomed, self-contained accommodation, consisting of living-room/bedroom, a kitchenette and bathroom. Each house is centrally-heated and fully-furnished with all the requirements of a modern home including a 'fridge, electric cooker, 'specially chosen bath, hot-press, T.V., special bed, and a geriatric armchair, as well the full supply of furniture, linen and delf.

Irish Monastic Influence

The students decided to identify with the impact which the monasteries of old had in bringing faith and hope to the people of Ireland of their day, by naming each new S.H.A.R.E. project after a former monastic settlement, such as Gougane Barra, Ardfert, Teach Chill Chr , Sceilg, Glendalough, Ard Mhacha, etc., because of the impact the faith of the old people and their devotion to the Mass and the Rosary was having on the members of S.H.A.R.E.

Development of self-confidence and self-belief

In the process, a self-confidence and a deepened sense of self-worth is generated for both groups. The young become aware of the warmth, the affection, the concern and the gentleness of the old as the friendship deepens. Subsequently, a new vision of life unfolds and a sense of purpose emerges for them. The old easily identify the level of insecurity, the sense of fear and the frailty of the young. But gradually they witness these disappear like morning mists in May. The old also are quick to identify the authenticity of the young and they find their enthusiasm and generosity a real tonic.

Each group adverts to a new influence unfolding. It is the potential within each person to affirm and enrich the other. The priceless value of the human person emerges for all involved in the relationship, as each becomes the catalyst in the growth of the other.

The Story of the Build-up

The build-up from the original twelve from one school to the present 1600 student members representing 23 schools is a story of youthful idealism and enthusiasm as the young responded to the needs of the elderly. But it is also a story of toil and effort, much of it in winter's cold in wet underfoot conditions in the alleys and tenements of the side-streets as they, the S.H.A.R.E. boys and girls sought, and continue to seek, the most needy of the city's senior citizens. They have already provided fully-furnished, three-roomed accommodation for in excess of 200 of the elderly in twelve villages and complexes around the city.

The Idea Spreads

As the mustard seed grows into a large tree from small beginnings, so S.H.A.R.E. too has grown. A number of schools in Ireland and abroad set up movements based on the S.H.A.R.E. ideal. The overseas ones are in Canada and the West Indies.

International Recognition

S.H.A.R.E. got international recognition in being chosen to represent the youth of Europe at the International Year of Older People and Solidarity Between Generations in Brussels in 1993, when the international conferences were held.

freely choose taking an active role in fostering a caring and just society. This philosophy also aims at guiding the youth in their search for a meaning to life, while the process provides them with the necessary experiences in charting the direction of their own lives.

Caring service leading to friendship and solidarity

This is developed through a hands-on experience of service – a structured programme of disciplined caring which nurtures the natural affection with which each person is endowed. This experience of caring brings S.H.A.R.E. members into regular contact with the older people. These older friends operate out of a well of wisdom that life's experiences have purified for them. Though limited in wisdom, the young gradually learn to drink from their own wells under the caring guidance of a new-found friend – a real 'anam-cara'.

This search by youth for meaning is now a priority for all age groups, as all people thirst for love and hunger for acceptance and understanding. But it is particularly true of the senior citizens and adolescents. When friendship is in time built between individuals from these two groups, a new phase of self-belief and of hope emerges. Hope, so evident in the mature, cross-laden lives of the old, is increasingly observed by the young, while they see it to be based on a simple but deep Christian faith, which in turn is bolstered by the authenticity of the old. This is where a new vision of solidarity among the generations evolves between these two groups especially who are searching together openly, respectfully and in empathetic listening. No wonder the boys and girls frequently express their indebtedness to the manner in which their relationships with the old have given them a new direction in life.

The friendship between the S.H.A.R.E. students and the elderly lasts through life and into death. When their elderly friends are called from this life, the boys and girls are there to shoulder their remains to the Church and graveyard and to join in the burial ceremonies and prayers. Afterwards they continue to remember them in their reminiscences, thoughts and prayers.

S.H.A.R.E. Mothers and S.H.A.R.E. Girls

In 1976 the boys sought and received the help of S.H.A.R.E. Mothers, i.e. mothers of boys of S.H.A.R.E., past-pupil groups of Cork Girls Secondary Schools and other ladies' groups. They visit and help in many creative and innovative ways, especially in the care of the sick and the dying.

Girls from some of the city's Secondary Schools joined in 1977 and worked with the boys in the visitation of the elderly and in fund-raising. They were to play a major role in both. In the following year, 1978, other boys' schools joined S.H.A.R.E.

It was at this time too that a full-time Co-ordinator was employed.

Fund-Raising

Because of the urgency to provide new homes, fund-raising became a priority of even greater urgency. The greatest challenge to the students became the organisation of the Annual pre-Christmas Fast. During that time they got an insight into business and financial matters and they experienced the marvellous generosity and support of Cork people. Successive Lord Mayors, City Managers, members of Cork Corporation and the staffs, as well as the Chief Executives, Programme Managers and staffs of the Southern Health Board, have been consistently supportive and affirming.

To enable S.H.A.R.E. qualify formally for the status of a charitable organisation, three Trustees were appointed to that role in 1986.

The New Plight of Senior Citizens

Because of their age, senior citizens are often inactive, lonely and depressed and these negatives are aggravated by feelings of isolation and abandonment which are further compounded by fears of assault and burglary. No wonder they fear the future. With their energy and general health deteriorating, and their feelings of abandonment increasing, their position is further compounded by their increasingly restricted mobility.

Relationships

Our relationships with other people are among life's most important experiences. We love, we hate, we mourn. As a result of this we sometimes feel elated and at other times we feel lonely. Life is a continuous process of growth, transition and finally, decline. But loneliness is common to us all. We are especially prone to be so in adolescence and in young adulthood. However, the loneliness of the house-bound elderly is in a category all of its own.

Impact on the teenagers

The teenagers visit the old people regularly. These visits are not trips to satisfy curiosity by going up the dark broken stairways to see the gloomy cramped spaces which constitute home for these penniless old people. Rather the visits sometimes mean hours of heart-rending listening, just sitting there and hearing the poor pour out the tragedy of their lives. Gradually the teenagers have got to know the real meaning of loneliness and what it is to be trapped in an attic room and left with one's memories.

The students agree that before their involvement with S.H.A.R.E. they had no idea of the problems faced by the elderly poor nor had they known the real meaning of loneliness. Now, they feel honoured by the friendship of the old, they have learned the meaning of commitment; they have come to realise that pity is no substitute for love and care and that to be a good listener is a necessary attribute.

S.H.A.R.E.'s Philosophy and Goals

Through a process of working "on the ground" with the elderly, the practical experience and insights gained over the years have gradually developed and clarified themselves into the identifiable and clear-cut philosophy and goals of the S.H.A.R.E. organisation. The following is a condensed statement of these:

- (a) Harnessing the giftedness of the young and the old.
- (b) The importance of values and attitudes.
- (c) The dignity of the human being/social awareness.
- (d) Caring service leading to friendship and solidarity.
- (e) Development of self-confidence and self-belief.

Harnessing the giftedness of the young and the old

S.H.A.R.E. has found that the exposure of the young to the living conditions of the old is a growth experience with tremendous potential for those participating – those who are providing the service and those who are the recipients of that generosity. It becomes an exercise in "accompanying", an experience of empathising with the feelings and aspirations of the other, which in turn, develops a new sense of solidarity. It is clear that young people have much to offer in terms of integrity, idealism and in talents of various kinds, while the old, on the other hand, have the wells of experience and wisdom and, perhaps most of all, their deep Christian faith which enables them to guide the young to respond realistically to the challenges of life. When these two areas of gift are harnessed, much is achieved to the enrichment of both.

Importance of values and attitudes

Consequently, the great growth experience for the young of S.H.A.R.E. was and is working in collaboration and in partnership with others. Resulting from this interaction, the young gradually come to appreciate the value of a philosophy of life. They get to understand the importance of right values and attitudes. They develop a new appreciation of the need of a sense of calm and of a vision of life that has balance. They come to a new level of awareness of the priceless nature of the unique person and of the warmth, affection and gentleness of the "forgotten old people" they have now come to know as friends. Though the old people's faces are now lined and their hair has gone grey and their bodies stooped, yet their spirit is strong and their level of Christian faith is extraordinarily high. It is exposure to these realities that gives the young people an insight into the positive aspects of life. For them, it is a genuinely formative experience.

Dignity of the human being/social awareness

S.H.A.R.E.'s philosophy is based on the message of the Crib around which they hold their annual pre-Christmas centre-city fund-raising Fast. A S.H.A.R.E. goal remains the restoration of the dignity of the human person to the frail, sometimes frightened and often lonely senior citizens by providing them with a home and living conditions in keeping with human dignity. But a primary aim continues to be the development of a sensitive Christian social awareness among the young with a view to helping them in time, as adults, to