

Empowerment: examples from the groups

La Halte d'Emmaüs, Esteville, April 1995

Yes, they most definitely are provocative. And these socially excluded people will remain so right to the end, these people who one day became Abbé Pierre's ragpickers.

They used their own savings to stop a family from being evicted, providing what the banks had refused: a cash advance, a loan. They did this in order to enable a family living in a caravan in Esteville to purchase a small plot of land and put into action their plan.

It has to be said that renovating a cob walled barn to make it into living accommodation does not cost the earth! Even though the family received unemployment benefit of 9,500F per month and the wife earned 6,000F a month, nobody wanted to help them!

If they hadn't been able to find the 90,000F they needed, a family with a four-year-old child would have been evicted at the end of March. Retired and disabled companions from Emmaus Esteville refused to accept the situation:

"No! We must help them, it's an emergency!"

They collected the 90,000F needed and the notary's fees in two days and the eviction was cancelled! The family simply could not believe it.

The notary suggested asking each of the companions who was willing to lend their money to come to his office to sign the loan paperwork and the reimbursement conditions in person.

"That's impossible! You don't know the people who have lent you the money. They are elderly and disabled companions, some of them are in wheelchairs and have had both their legs amputated!", explained Vincent, one of the community leaders.

The father of the family was taken aback and moved by their gesture and exclaimed,

"Unbelievable! I will never forget this and whatever might happen to me, I pledge to pay them back every penny of their money."

The notary then offered to come to the community to get the papers signed by the companions.

What a wonderful Easter present and what a message of hope! What provocation... the poor are capable of doing what the rich refuse to do:

Follow their hearts and take risks.

Emmaus San Sebastian

Training for Emmaus partners from Spanish groups took place on Friday 4 and Saturday 5 November 2011. The course was held in Donostia, San Sebastian, at the Loiola Cultural Centre. Emaús Fundación Social, the organiser, encouraged all the staff to take part, with attendance being voluntary. The issue tackled, debated and examined was empowerment. For those who have never heard of this concept, it should be explained that the Spanish term *empoderar* had become obsolete until a short time ago but is now being used more and more. The Spanish dictionary defines empowerment as “giving power to a socio-economically disadvantaged collective so that it can improve its living conditions through self-management.” The organisation’s management is delighted to take part in these training days which also constitute a rare opportunity to meet up in a more personal and group setting, with this not often being the case in their everyday work.

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Emmaus Cambridge

In recent years, the Emmaus Cambridge Community has become much more involved in Emmaus events at national and international level. This has encouraged Companions to take more interest in Emmaus and want to get involved. One of our Companions went to a workcamp in the Koln Community during which he helped to load a container for a group in Poland. When he returned to Cambridge, he suggested that the Cambridge Community should hold a similar workcamp later in the year. He wanted other UK Communities to understand solidarity and to consider organising containers in their Communities, so the theme of the workcamp was ‘Solidarity – the next 20 years’.

It was agreed by the Community but staff made the decision not to get involved, this was to be the sole responsibility of the Companion who had the idea. He was given as much support as he needed but he was responsible for doing everything. He was given some training on how to plan the event and he prepared a schedule of tasks to be carried out before the workcamp. He sent out the invitations, made all the follow up phone calls and planned each day of the workcamp, including the preparation of a container for a group in Poland.

The workcamp consisted of a week in the Cambridge Community and was attended by 12 Companions from the UK, Holland and Poland. Every day was spent carrying out a number of maintenance tasks around the Community, discussions about Emmaus and preparing for the container which would be loaded at the end of the week. The Companion in charge was responsible for making sure that it all went well and dealing with any problems that arose.

The workcamp was considered a great success by those who came and by the Community itself. The Companion who organised it learnt a lot about from the experience and is now planning another for next year. In previous years the Community did not hold such events and Companions were not given any responsibility so this was a great step forward in the empowerment of all those involved.

Emmaus Cambridge

The Cambridge Community has had the same Community Leader for over 15 years and had become a very disempowering environment where all decisions were made by the Community Leader and Companions and staff were used to acting on instructions rather than taking any initiative themselves. This would require a long term programme of change that began with a new Community Leader.

Initially, the new Community Leader had to establish himself as somebody who could be trusted and relied on so he continued making all the decisions at first until the Community had confidence in him and his ability to run the Community. Once this trust was established, he started to delegate tasks to others within the Community, gradually building the confidence of others to make decisions for themselves and supporting them in the process. The most important aspect of this process was to create an environment in which people felt that it was OK to make mistakes and learn from them.

At first, members of the Community found it difficult to make decisions because the responsibility left them feeling uncertain but over a period of 2 years it was possible to see real change. Community meetings were changed to encourage more discussion, a solidarity committee was formed and Companions were listened to. When simple Community problems arose, the Community Leader would not get involved as before but encouraged the Companions to make their own decisions and find their own solutions.

Staff played a very important part in this process (3 of whom were former Companions) so they also had to learn how to take responsibility. They were sent on training courses and tasks were delegated to them that enabled them to gain their self-confidence. Eventually, they started to make decisions without referring to the Community Leader and their status with Companions was much improved. The Community Leader then rearranged the layout of the office so that Companions could not easily approach the Community Leader and would have to speak to other staff instead. Any operational Community matters were dealt with at the most basic level possible and not referred upwards. If the Community Leader was asked to make a decision on simple matters, he would refer Companions to other staff instead to remove the sense of reliance on his position and authority.

The Community Leader gradually withdrew from all but the most important decision making and took on an international role so that he was in the Community less, thus allowing others to take more responsibility without the feeling that they were being observed all the time. As a consequence, the Community Leader now has a very small part to play in the Community and is really only part-time. As the Community has changed and new people have come in who don't remember how things used to be, the Community has become an empowering environment where Companions can question and challenge decisions and take more responsibility for their lives

GtU – DENMARK

Sometimes you have to tell the companions and other community members that you won't take part in just any job. At the last GtU general assembly, a decision was taken to produce a brochure about the group. The president, who was leading the assembly, asked who would like to take part, and three people raised their hands. I was asked if I wanted to participate and I said no. Four months have gone by since the GA and I know that the printers to be used and the possibility of obtaining funding to cover some or all of the cost have been discussed. The content must now be written but I haven't seen it and I haven't asked to see it. Only once did I agree to a request, when I was asked to provide a list of key events in our association's history. Even if we work as coordinators, we are not compelled to play a leading role in everything that is going on. When we refuse to become involved, others find the energy to do what needs to be done. It is likely that a good part of the content highlights issues that are not important in my eyes, but that is democracy in action.

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Emmaus Cambridge

The Emmaus Cambridge Community has had a workshop for over 15 years that tested and repaired electrical items for sale in the shop. It was always felt that the workshop should be supervised by a qualified electrician who was a member of staff who would train and support Companions who worked in there. This was the situation for many years until Companions started to question why a paid member of staff was necessary. The Community looked at the situation carefully and could see no logical reason why a member of staff was necessary so the decision was made to make the staff member redundant and leave the Companions to run the workshop on their own.

The Companions were given training to make sure that they had the confidence to do everything that was needed in the workshop and were given a budget to work to and an annual sales target to meet. The Companions were encouraged to make all the decisions relating to the workshop in collaboration with the Community Managers and one of the first things they did was to completely reorganise the workshop and sales areas. This immediately gave them a sense of ownership and it was interesting to see how much more efficient the workshop became.

In the first full year, the workshop earned the same amount of money as the year before when a member of staff was employed and there have been no problems with electrical items failing or being returned to the shop. The morale is high in the workshop and the Companions now train other Companions to ensure that skills are passed on.