

# VOLUNTEERS IN A COMMUNITY

FR. JULIAN PUNCH

Many events and people within my own life experience of the last five years have convinced me of the absolute necessity for the growth at all levels of alternative communities. These are communities or groupings of people which are marked by the essential human qualities and rights of life, e.g.:

1. Care and concern for all people within the community.
2. A keen awareness and concern for all other communities, both local, national and international.
3. A growth in communal decision making.
4. Encouragement and recognition of individual initiatives directed towards the good of the whole community.
5. Understanding on the part of all people of the power that they have in common action and agreements.
6. The development by the people of a methodology and common plan to obtain power over their lives. These basis communities are in sharp contrast to some of the existing situations of dehumanising qualities and lifestyles that exist in our society, e.g. materialism, competition, rank individualism, lack of power and decision making within one's life, individual profit and consumption by individuals at the expense of a growing number of people (see the Henderson Inquiry into Poverty).

It is in this context that I would like to develop the concept and practice of volunteers working within a community.

Five years ago I became involved with a small group of disadvantaged school leavers who were unable to find work because of the unemployment situation at the time. Through their personal misfortune they looked together towards some

activity, and a deeper understanding of what was happening to them. They started picking fruit that was being wasted in the area, and when they received very little in return for the fruit after selling it to a well known Transnational Company, they turned to jam making as a viable work alternative. Their initiatives centralised around the Chigwell Housing Commission area. A subsequent census of the area revealed the following facts:

1. There was a 12% unemployment rate, which at that time was three times the national average (this now stands at 20%).
2. Young unemployed in the 15-18 age group were disproportionately represented in the unemployed group, many with severe literacy problems.
3. Unemployment figures were affected by the artificial and large grouping of old people, single parent families, those receipt of sickness benefits, and invalid persons.
4. In common with other Housing Department developments, there was a lack of adequate physical and social services, e.g. poor public transport, inadequate shopping facilities, few opportunities for social interaction, poor medical treatment facilities, lack of access to legal aid.
5. 85% of the working population work in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in local and transnational companies existing close by.
6. Subsequent social problems and powerlessness amongst the people.

The A.C.P.C. FORUM is produced quarterly on behalf of the Australian Crime Prevention Council.

The A.C.P.C. FORUM is distributed by direct mail to the full membership of The Australian Crime Prevention Council, including Police Departments, Social Workers and citizens of the Commonwealth and those persons in Australia and Overseas. The magazine is also forwarded to Police Stations, Security Companies, Parole Boards, Prisons, Military Police, Institutes of Criminology, Parole Officers and the Departments of Justice in each State of Australia and New Zealand, upon request.

At the direction of the Australian Crime Prevention Council, the magazine is published by Kenneth I. Weaver for Magazine Art Pty. Ltd. who act as publishers under the auspice of the Australian Crime Prevention Council.

Copies of A.C.P.C. FORUM are available to all members of the Australian Crime Prevention Council, as part of their membership subscription. Companies or individuals who wish to purchase a subscription only, may do so from Magazine Art Pty. Ltd. at \$29.50 per annum.

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KENNETH I. WEAVER, PUBLISHER

Following the identification of the community needs the original unemployed group has grown through action, encouraging leadership, stimulating consciousness, presenting issues, identifying uncaring structures, to effect changes in many sections of the community. This all happened in a very interesting way. As soon as the unemployed group started to do things, other groups within the local area came to us and said — “Well, what about us”. Some single parent women came and said — “We are really bored with being stuck at home with our children”. A local gang of young people, after stoning the church roof, made it very clear that they didn’t have anywhere to meet or many things to do, apart from illegally visiting the local pub. Elderly people told us of their struggle to get somewhere to meet and do things, and of sharply increasing rental rates. A local lady discovered items purchased at the local shop cost 10 cents more than elsewhere. We were flooded with school children coming to the church and drop-in centre, who had a long established pattern of truancy.

I was besieged most nights at the church by young people and old people who were really sad and lonely. The young people I would send home at eleven o’clock to get ready for another onslaught of depressed elderly men who badly needed a cup of strong black coffee before facing the barrage at home.

I reflected deeply on a group of young school children who came to see me, eating chips and drinking coke for their tea while I was cooking my own wholesome meal. One boy who was eating a five-decker dagwood style sandwich remarked that he was lucky because he had a five course meal.

Government welfare workers only helped to add weight to the growing pressure. They sent up young local people who had experienced mental problems. Probation officers started referring young offenders and people coming out of gaol to the rapidly expanding and ill equipped drop-in centre.

I will never forget the day that I met a young boy who had been in high school for two years and who couldn’t sign his name. When I asked him to write his name on a piece of paper some of his friends said — “He’s stupid; he can’t write his name.” I just couldn’t believe it. I didn’t want to.

Every week some young people came to the Church in search of sanctuary or a bed. Their parents, if still around, found their children’s unemployment impossible to understand or tolerate. Many young people had suffered abuse quite criminal in its nature, but unattended to. On the other hand the young people were consistently before the courts, without adequate defence. They faced the very real threat of a good sentence for insignificant matters in comparison with the violence done to them often by well respected groups within the community.

Slowly some order started to emerge out of chaos, but not without a struggle. This came through the emergence of para-welfare groups that started to meet the needs we were experiencing, and which local volunteers started to set up as self help groups.

This was a slow process, as many local people refused to believe that problems did exist within the community and quite actively opposed the community development work as “putting the locals down”. The reaction on our own part was to recognise that the community had many strengths. The most important being in an existing feeling of “support for one another”.

The local gang system was an example of this. The young people, having experienced family break-ups, united to support one another. Unlike peer groups within the middle class children, they included anyone who had a need. They used one word for sharing — this was ‘skins’ — ‘how many skins have we got left’ — meaning bottles, cigarettes, dollars etc.

Local streets of people had a common meeting time for women — over a cup of coffee in the morning — to support one another.

The question was how to extend these groups and help them find ways to plug into existing welfare services of which they had little knowledge, without losing their identity and strength as a community.

Herein lay the struggle. Local bureaucracies were reluctant to humanise themselves and serve the local interests. The local Commonwealth Employment Office saw its position threatened by a ‘radical unemployed group’ and reacted by immediately finding jobs for our young volunteer workers, who were living on the unemployment benefits. The local council were more interested in developing parks than providing much needed facilities in the area. The local media could only dwell on disadvantage in a sensational way rather than show the obvious sharing strength of the people with sensitivity. Social workers tended to flood into the area as soon as something happened and set up their ‘own thing’. Schools were threatened by talk of ‘illiteracy’ and ‘work ethic orientated education’ and quickly closed their ranks. Local police regarded the gathering together of young people as a dangerous thing. Instead of ‘kicking a football with the kids’ and getting to know them, they stepped up patrols of the area, only adding to an ‘us and them’ mentality.

This opposition, while annoying, linked people and made them strong is a common conviction that their natural unity and sharing ability was their most important tool for community development. Gradually, infra structures have been built into the community which have used natural grouping as their base. Once established and seen to be effective, local bureaucracies have tended to be co-operative, although this has taken a long time and is the hardest process of community development of all.

While it is correct to say that Chigwell has natural grouping, it is also correct to say that many people suffered from severe isolation. This was very prevalent amongst the most disadvantaged groups and is a constant hurdle to overcome. Voluntary workers developed special ways of overcoming it, largely because they had experienced the same difficulties themselves.

Etched on my mind is the story of a lady who is the matrix of the voluntary workers in Chigwell. When the church first asked me to visit the area, I had few names of people. Priestlike and enthusiastic, I knocked at 9.00 a.m. on the door of one of the names of a family I had been given. I was greeted at the door by a gruff ‘you are too early’. It was the same thing on the following day at 10 a.m. On the third day, at 11 a.m., I was reluctantly admitted, and over a cup of coffee the story came out. The lady in question had been a voluntary worker of a regional service organisation, had a very bad accident while on the job, which had left her crippled. Nobody in the community thought to visit her while she was recuperating, and she had become very bitter and disillusioned. Here was I two years later; and nobody in between. That lady today is a co-ordinator of several of the groups run by our community. She understands the isolation and the — ‘it’s easier to stay at home’ syndrome only too well, and is an expert at helping single parent women and the elderly.

The initial unemployment group developed strategies to ‘get to people’. They conducted a survey not only to get statistics but also to get talking to the unemployed and see what they wanted to do. One of the unemployed girls developed a plan to get into the homes of the girls who were virtual domestic slaves. she took simple bead-craft work into their homes and thereby gained their confidence and helped them move into a more social situation in the wider community.

From these early experiences of one of the first groupings of unemployed people in Australia since depression times, has grown a considerable para-welfare organisation. If you like, a model of self help groups run by the local people. While the community has about 15 employed people, the group could not operate without a large group of local volunteer personnel.

I would like to briefly describe these groups and outline their functions.

#### **CHIGWELL UNITED UNEMPLOYED GROUP:**

Chigwell United Unemployed is a group of unemployed young people funded by the Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS), which provides meaningful occupational, educational, leisure and job finding opportunities for the unemployed. The group is supported by two Project Officers and two part-time tutors, and many volunteers. About 40 young people attend each week.

#### **WORK TRANSITION AND LITERACY PROGRAMME:**

This programme provides support and learning opportunities for young unemployed with psycho-social disabilities. Participants are referred by welfare agencies and are involved in a range of organised activities categorised as Basic Skills, Life Skills, Literacy Skills and job find techniques. Recently, funding was transferred from National Employment and Training (NEAT) to Educational Programme for Unemployed Youth (EPUY). The programme comes under the auspices of the Hobart Technical College, and has two Project Officers, one Basic Skills Co-ordinator, and one part-time supervisor and many volunteers. 20 young unemployed attend over a three month period.

#### **LINK-UP (CHIGWELL COMMUNITY SUPPORT GROUP):**

This programme runs programmes for children, women and the aged. A weekly learning exchange for women, a monthly social for the aged. A part-time co-ordinator spends much time in visitation and assisting people in the area of welfare rights. Link-Up is now involved with a Kindergarten Union to provide a 'play group' for parents and young children on a weekly basis. Link-Up's most important function is in informing and encouraging people to obtain help, e.g. rent, welfare rights, medical benefits, housing and transport.

#### **MARIA ISLAND CAMP COMMITTEE:**

Every year a camp of ten days on Maria Island is run to provide a holiday for many who would not otherwise have this opportunity. The camp, run by unemployed people and volunteer adults, encourages leadership and youth initiatives.

#### **WORK ALTERNATIVE:**

Although there is no easy answer to unemployment, several committed and unfunded young people are attempting to develop a viable work alternative and compatible life style co-operative. Hopefully, in future, this will provide a financially viable and supportive alternative to the normal work situation.

#### **McINTYRE HOUSE AND AUXILIARY:**

With a growing awareness of the number of homeless people in our community, McIntyre House is of great importance as a project. With the help of Kennerley Homes, 20 young people are provided with a warm, caring, home situation. A core group of four volunteer resident personnel run the home. The Auxiliary, a small group of women, has been responsible for raising considerable funds in a short

period of time to provide the necessary furnishings and amenities for McIntyre House. The State Government has this year provided a salary for a full-time resident administrator. The Federal Government has been approached to help financially in the running of the home, so far unsuccessfully.

#### **ADULT LITERACY:**

Ten adults, drawn from the local community, have been trained in a five week course to teach illiterate adults in a way which is sensitive to their needs and relevant to the conditions of life in Chigwell and surrounding suburbs. Adult Education Funding employs a part-time co-ordinator, and assists in the development of locally based teaching materials.

#### **ADMINISTRATION:**

As can be imagined, all these groups need to be supported by an efficient secretarial, financial, legal and medical service, accessible and at service to all. This has now been achieved as a co-operative effort with the employment of a full-time secretary, volunteer treasurer, and part-time office co-ordinator. Many volunteer personnel are involved in providing an efficient service to all the groups. This has been very much a growing team effort.

#### **SOME STATISTICS:**

While the nature of the community's work makes it very difficult to gauge either its effectiveness or the size of the area of work, it is important to apply some tool of assessment. The following figures give some indication over the last 12 months.

1. 40 young unemployed people are involved on daily programmes within the community.
2. An average of 30 home calls are made each week.
3. Approximately 30 people avail themselves of counselling and welfare rights' services each week.
4. The 'learning exchange' and 'play group' involve 20-30 parents with their children.
5. 60-70 homeless people have found accommodation through services the community provides.
6. 30 people have received literacy tuition in the last 12 months period.
7. Over 80 young people have had a planned and supervised holiday.
8. A para medical and legal service, where doctors and lawyers see an average of 10 to 15 people per week.

Five years after the initial unemployed group got together, St Monica's Community has a developed philosophy and praxis about Community Development and therefore about the people (volunteers) who have brought this about. This philosophy and praxis differs from commonly held views about welfare work and professionalism. This does, I believe, relate to the starting point of a view of society which generally states that all people have a right to human development.

#### **DEVELOPMENT OF TEAMS:**

In relating to the various needs of disadvantaged groups within the community at Chigwell, teams of people have emerged. These are comprised of volunteers, paid staff and representatives of the people for whom the team is working. Welfare workers are invited to share in these teams either according to specific needs or on a regular basis. The teams meet on a daily or weekly basis. These meetings are seen as vital for the development of the work and the support of the team. The meeting of a morning is to plan the day or week's work, and of an afternoon to assess the success, analyse the difficulties and generally support one another.

While the team acts autonomously it reports back on a monthly basis to the umbrella organisation, i.e. the Community Council. These reports are a full and accurate assessment of the month's work, and any need for policy change is outlined and put to the Community Council.

On a daily basis the Public Officer acts as a Programme Co-ordinator and meets on a weekly basis with each group, generally supporting and relating any decision he has taken on behalf of the group back to the Community Council or its executive.

The Public Officer meets on a regular basis with the executive of the Community Council, discussing the decisions that need to be taken between meetings of the Community Council, and is responsible for relating these back to the groups.

The structure has grown out of the experiences of the last five years and has proved itself in involving as many people as possible in decision making while ensuring the day to day continuance of the groups. It also ensures that volunteer personnel have an equal involvement in decision making.

The Community Council as an umbrella para-welfare organisation is a legally and financially responsible body which ensures the respect of big bureaucracies for local initiatives.

### **VOLUNTEERISM:**

At St Monica's there is little distinction between those who are paid and those who are unpaid. The common bond which is a uniting factor is the personal conviction of being able to serve other people with a priority for those who are particularly disadvantaged by society. I believe this is a desire and ability which most people have, but which is not upheld by our society as important and is therefore a largely untapped resource. Remuneration, personal profit and esteem are much more the opposing values of communities.

It is very important for Governments to recognize the need in any community development work to provide funds for the provision of personnel. It is also important for community groups to see paid and unpaid personnel of equal importance, both groups having an equal right to decision making and initiative taking without prejudice. I would suggest that the prevailing view that 'professionals' are superior in training, knowledge and expertise is responsible for the demise of volunteers. There is, moreover, a dangerous trend within society for professionals to regard themselves as an elite to jealously guard their trade secrets and thus maintain their power, position and particular philosophical view points. If this structure is maintained, volunteers have little role to play. We should see, instead, the important role that volunteers have to play and not regard them as the 'navies' of welfare.

### **DECENTRALISATION:**

I would propose that where community initiatives are localised to easily identifiable communities they have much more hope of achieving a human development goal. Initiatives and common decision making is maximised to the extent of involving a greater number of people. It can be demonstrated to Government that self help initiatives are not only more successful in achieving goals, they are less costly to the general community.

The particular needs of communities vary greatly. When local people can identify their own needs and build up support and service groups to meet these needs themselves, the whole community grows in self-esteem and confidence. It allowed the local community to be sensitive to its own needs, and find answers that are relevant to the people involved.

This concept is again in sharp contrast to present trends to centralise and therefore bureaucratise welfare departments.

This has led to isolation within our local communities where people either don't know about services or are too frightened to approach people behind desks who are cold and unfeeling about their clients needs anyway.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF ISSUES:**

A significant step in involving volunteers within the local community at Chigwell has been the development of issues. through this process people have seen through some analysis of society the causes of their particular disadvantage. It was, for example, very important for young unemployed people to experience as they did the structures that were either causing or not helping their problem. In taking fruit they had picked to a transnational company and getting little recompense they understood two things. Companies exist in the main to make profit and not to develop the dignity of human beings. When the local council was slow to help in finding a meeting place for unemployed people, important questions emerged. "Who represents us on the council? How do we get a vote? Can we go to council meetings?"

When the group needed some funding to continue, some of its members started to ask — "What political party is in power? What are its beliefs about unemployed people? Is it doing anything to help?"

Through the development of issues, volunteer community workers understand the changes that are necessary to bring about a more equitable society and the means to do so.

### **STRUCTURES AND DECISION MAKING:**

As a priest working in the community I was very conscious of the way people always expected me to make all the decisions. People put me in the role of a 'professional'. When the roof developed a leak, the plumber asked me how to fix it. The temptation to 'do for' and 'not with' destroys human initiative, and common decision making. Hierarchical structures not only take the fun out of life, they stop people building community.

When our community, to apply for funding was required to incorporate as an association, it took a very important step. It recognised that in seeking opinions and reaching decisions people felt important and much more part of a community. Slowly the day to day decisions, policies of the community, and its general direction and goals took on a new significance because all within the community — young and old — discovered they could do it and, moreover, were united in doing it.

In the shelter run for young unemployed homeless people, meeting night is something eagerly awaited by all the residents. The T.V. goes off and the air is electric as young people make the exciting discovery of community decision making. It is very formal, well organised and important in the eyes of all. The adults, too, look forward to the monthly Community Council night, and we have always had a quorum.

### **ROLE OF WELFARE TECHNICIANS WITH VOLUNTEERS:**

Having attacked professionalism as such for its lack of idealism, I would propose that people with training and particular expertise have a very real role to play in community development. It is in the nature of that role and the relationship with volunteer workers which I think needs careful definition.

In the early days of the Chigwell experiment we noticed a very high latch-key rate amongst school children. This was brought to our notice as a result of a survey conducted by the Division of Recreation. The obvious social problems were of

concern. A small group of local people approached the unemployed group to help. Being fully extended, we suggested a couple of social workers be approached to help. The word got around and 12 social workers turned up and the volunteer locals, threatened by technical language and professional jargon, went home. Several meetings and many months later, and with no evident progress or action, the social workers returned the concept of 'playspace' — an after-school and holiday recreational programme — back to the locals. What could have been an advantageous interaction between the locals and welfare technicians, both groups with important expertise, became a football match with the local kids the losers.

Today 'Playspace' is a healthy on-going programme in Chigwell for latch-key children. This only because both local volunteers and welfare workers have developed a sense of the importance and role that each group can play.

The additional and final role that welfare technicians should aim for is redundancy. As initiators and developers of community action, they have an important short term role. However, it is insulting and inaccurate to infer that one cannot teach local volunteers the basic skills needed to run local self-help groups. The pre-eminent skill is that of the volunteer who lives in the area and understands the local people and their needs.

#### **RECRUITMENT OF VOLUNTEERS:**

This 24 dollar jackpot question always arouses an unhealthy interest. How can we get more volunteers? Governments see it as a way of reducing social welfare costs. Organisations see it as a way of expanding their operations without involving Government funding. Bureaucracies love doing the 'paper work' and leaving the spade work to volunteers.

You will recruit volunteers in so far as you respect them as people with feelings, initiatives and above all, people who have a right to decision making with the particular organisation. Sensitivity to a person is the best way to draw out their basic concern for others which is the 'stuff' of volunteers.

Volunteers have rights. These rights are often ignored within our organisations and we still wonder why we 'cannot get people to work for us'. Recruitment will come with an organisations respect for the following rights —

1. A volunteer has a right to work in the way they see they can work best.
2. A volunteer has a right to equal decision making within any organisation.
3. A volunteer has a right of access to facilities and resources to achieve a particular welfare goal.
4. A volunteer has a right to obtain knowledge and expertise and to be trained in these fields.
5. A volunteers has a right to be financially remunerated according to their particular needs by the general community.
6. A volunteer has a right to wrok for change within the community.

If you cannot recruit volunteers, you should see how you are infringing their rights. One last 'secret of success' with volunteers is often ignored. YOU SHOULD always ensure the first task that any volunteer undertakes is for that person a highly satisfying and successful experience.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

I have tried to develop some principles of volunteerism from my own experience with self help groups over the last

few years. I would in no way see these principles as infallible. Nor would I see any model of para welfare work as an exclusive model to be followed and initiated at all costs. I am sure that any local initiatives must grow from the shared experiences, and common decisions of the local people. This will always need to take into account localised needs and conditions.

I would assure you that the experiment in Chigwell has been for myself and many others a personally satisfying and fulfilling experience. If St Monica's Community disappeared as a para-welfare organisation tomorrow, I would not be overly concerned. So many have grown as people in concern and commitment that this would have been a sufficient goal alone for its limited existence.

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## **PLENARY SESSION — TUESDAY 14th AUGUST 1979 (Afternoon Session)**

There was considerable discussion on the emotional issues raised by the speakers. It must be noted here that Father Punch did not speak to his paper. He spoke on the theme of the criminality of big business in exploiting the poor and he did not in fact touch on the theme for the afternoon. As Dr. Nittim's paper, however interesting and well constructed, did not deal with the subject either and both speakers dwelt on the unemployment situation and the employed, the discussion groups were left without obvious identifiable issues to be discussed, and they were undecided as to whether they should be following the programme or the speakers.

In spite of this there were some interesting thoughts about work and unemployment. There were queries as to the future of the "work ethic" and some suggestions about easing the unemployment situation. This included the promotion of early retirement, encouraging women who wished to work part-time rather than full-time, and providing options for people to choose leisure rather than employment. There was a suggestion that the Federal Government should lend money to self-help groups to get started in their own communal business enterprises.

Some groups did manage to bring their discussion back to the scheduled theme for the afternoon and made some recommendations about volunteers. One group recommended the extensive use of volunteers working alongside professionals in the many areas of social welfare, and another group made the very interesting suggestion that volunteers in a community should be paid a maintenance wage or at least their expenses.

## **WEDNESDAY 15th AUGUST 1979 (Morning Session)**

From the programme:

"There have been times in history when the police have played a significant role in primary prevention of crime. A possible example of this has been the village policeman concept in rural England, with his role there of community friend and adviser. Is such a role possible in our complex urban society? Can the policeman leave his patrol car on occasion and become involved in community centre programmes? These are some of the questions to be discussed in today's sessions."