

Integration of the Marginalized

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1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the affluence of London lie pockets of deprivation. Despite proximity to central London labour markets, business activity and economic opportunity, many members of disadvantaged communities are excluded from these wider opportunities. The Baytree Centre is located in Brixton, one of the most deprived areas. Brixton's population is multicultural and movement of ethnic groups in and out of Brixton is dynamic. It has a vibrant business community. On the other hand, Brixton has its share of problems characteristic of inner cities: riots, crimes, drugs, poverty, unemployment and school dropouts.

The Baytree Centre, is a non-governmental community project, where I work as a Manager. I have worked there for the last 6 years in trying to help disadvantaged women, girls, and children move towards integration into mainstream society. Currently, my team deals with more than 1000 beneficiaries per year; aged 0-70. Around 90% of our adult beneficiaries are unemployed and depend on the government for all or part of their basic sustenance — for themselves and also for their families. Over the last 10 years, our beneficiaries have come from the U.K. and 99 other countries around the world. Generally, 25 % are asylum seekers, refugees, newly arrived immigrants; 75% are a mixture of settled immigrants and U.K. residents who were born and raised in the inner city.

Our asylum seekers, refugees, and newly arrived immigrants generally cannot speak, read, or write in English. Some are illiterate in their own mother tongue. They are traumatised by war or persecution and may have left behind or lost some immediate family members. They are generally shy, docile, and gener-

ous. They struggle with the basic necessities of life such as housing, children's needs, bills, and communication. They feel isolated, overwhelmed or lost amidst the new system of British culture particularly in education, work, inner city, and mainstream society. Those who have personal toughness and determination to live keep trying to integrate. Those who find shock, pain, and sudden change of circumstances unbearable tend to buckle under if not supported quickly enough e.g. depression/suicide attempts. The youth are particularly vulnerable. Left without support, they could easily be sucked into the troubled ways of the inner city.

Our beneficiaries who were born and raised in the inner city have in general missed out on life's opportunities. They have low levels of literacy, 'job-readiness skills', educational attainment, self-worth, interpersonal skills, appreciation of the value of education, and professional outlook. Some are used to waiting or expecting to be given opportunities by the system rather than searching or creating opportunities for themselves. Around 28% of the women are sole-parent providers. The majority of adults have already realised they want to move towards social inclusion and be integrated into mainstream society especially for the sake of their children. This inner-city-born group can be generally difficult to deal with on a day-to-day basis. They can come across as rough, aggressive, unforgiving, demanding on others, argumentative, or uninterested, complacent, and fickle-minded. The girls mirror the adults at varying levels of intensity.

Baytree's team is composed of 26 paid staff and 100 volunteers. We are all women, multicultural, and our ages range from 16-70. Some of our staff are former beneficiaries. Our Baytree Mission? Creating integrated pathways towards social inclusion of inner city families through supportive training and educational programmes for women and girls in accordance with Christian values and ideals.

We help break the cycle of state dependency and facilitate the road to social integration by dealing with 3 or 4 generations simultaneously. These are our latest intergenerational services: 1) Training for Unemployed Service, 2) Crèche Service, 3) Youth Service, 4) Volunteer Service, 5) Personal Development Service and 6) Conference Service. Mothers, grandmothers and young women usually start with studying English or computing and then move on to jobs, further education or work experience. Girls aged 5-16 are helped to stay in education and challenged to fulfil their potential.

2. THE INSPIRATION AND PHILOSOPHY

As an ordinary working mother, I get my inspiration and philosophy from my Christian vocation and the teachings of Blessed Josemaría. As a Christian, I understand my role as a part of the team who help continue Christ's work on

earth. For me, work is a way to love. This means a way to love the talents and skills I have; a way to love others through the use of the talents I have; and a way to love God through love of others.

The philosophy behind this inspiration is based on Blessed Josemaría's teaching that my daily work can be a creative co-operation with God. In the case of my work with disadvantaged people, I can participate in the co-operative task of God's ongoing work of drawing them to Him. This means that, through my work, I can face the harsh problems of society and help transform the harshness into something beautiful. I can become one of what Blessed Josemaría described as the "sowers of peace and joy"¹ in this harsh environment by becoming a person who builds goodwill and understanding and gives love, rather than one who spreads apathy, division, aggression, or destruction. Through my work, I can encourage generosity in others and build a team who complement each other's talents thus enabling us to reach more people. Through my work and our team co-operation, a very high standard of professional work can be produced because it is motivated by love of others and love of God rather than our own self-glorification.

Through my work I also discover God as I converse with Him in my heart and mind. For example, I ask His help in restoring peace in the Centre in tense situations, to decide what to say to a young asylum seeker who wants to end her life, and where to get the money to pay 26 hardworking staff. Working at Baytree has constantly challenged my Christian values and ideals. These ideals are the opportunity to practise the virtues of faith, hope, and love to the full. Blessed Josemaría's teachings help me to live those values and ideals in very practical ways.

3. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF BLESSED JOSEMARÍA'S TEACHINGS IN IDENTIFYING AND SOLVING PROBLEMS, AND THE CONSEQUENCES

a) Before Starting at Baytree Initiating dialogue, giving hope, and setting targets

Beneficiaries come to Baytree for different needs. Examples of their perceived needs are: help with English or IT literacy, childcare services during training, after-school support, or volunteer experience. Starting with a beneficiary's

¹ *Furrow*, 59.

perceived need, I initiate the dialogue by non-verbal gestures of welcome, respect and care. For example I make sure I am the first one to smile and show that I care through attention to little details such as opening doors and helping carry things when mothers enter the building with a push chair or bike. With this approach, I have noticed that difficult or aggressive individuals soften up their response. Prior to our meeting, respect for the dignity of the beneficiary has already been communicated by the clean, tidy, and warm surroundings.

My goal is to establish mutual respect beginning with this first encounter. Once established, we can start to rely on each other's word of honour in delivering and responding to a service that we both agreed to embark upon. If she is a mother, I try to affirm the dignity of her role by recognising the sacrifices that she has made for the sake of her children. I also encourage her to be proud because the work she is doing is done out of unconditional love and therefore is beyond price. When a woman is ready for work outside the home, she must be able look at any employer in the eye and proudly declare that she is a mother.

While a woman is with us at Baytree, I challenge her to demonstrate her ability to be professionally competent at training and at managing herself and her home. Once she defines her personal target, she is ready to start her journey towards integration. In time, our bond of mutual respect can develop into friendship and trust. If she is a young student, she still must be able to demonstrate the ability to be professionally competent and at managing herself at home or anywhere else.

b) Staying at Baytree

Offering opportunities, keeping peace, creating a bright and cheerful atmosphere, and raising standards

The educational and training opportunities put together by Baytree staff to foster integration are two-pronged. Each beneficiary is challenged to acquire professional competence and Christian virtues. The women are challenged to acquire professional competence in each activity by aiming to achieve national accreditation or awards of excellence. In terms of Christian virtues, each woman is helped to discover what character traits she needs to develop to be 'job-ready', competent, able to help others and ready to keep struggling despite difficulties.

With six different services run simultaneously and a wide variety of nationalities, personal backgrounds, beliefs, culture, ages, and temperaments, it is not surprising that it can be a challenge to maintain peace on a daily basis. If Brixton is plagued with riots, how could I stop beneficiaries from 'rioting' at Baytree? Through experience, I have learned that the best cure is prevention. So, I make it

a point that at the dialogue stage, the beneficiary and I (or a parent if a minor) agree to respect the dignity of each other and the others around us, and that the beneficiary should come to me if there is anyone who does not show respect towards her. I also work with the staff to develop a Christian family atmosphere in the Centre. The beneficiary will then be helped by a family atmosphere created by individuals who strive to be cheerful, accommodating, affectionate, understanding, hardworking, thoughtful, positive, serene, attentive to detail, professionally competent, respectful and humble. She will also notice that personal appearance and styles of dressing are varied and reflect a person's age, personality, and the nature of their job, but that they are always in accordance with each one's dignity as a Christian woman. Furthermore, she will not fail to see that her surroundings are clean, bright, tidy, well-maintained and sober, but with good taste and warmth.

Training periods are structured to prioritise the family. We run training hours when school aged children are at school. When the mothers and mature women leave to collect their children at school, young people take over the use of the premises. A peaceful and cheerful environment facilitates acquiring professional competence and Christian virtues.

In practice, I have learned how challenging it is to maintain peace and create a bright and cheerful atmosphere on a daily basis. It takes a serious personal and team effort to build it and it can take just one person and a few seconds to ruin it. The 'Manager' is ultimately the person expected to restore peace and joy, and unity in diversity. With hundreds of people, and situations that can lead to disturbance and disunity, I need to call on all of the Guardian Angels for help. I also have to remember that my family needs to see me in good shape when I return home from work. With this in mind, I see the pressing need to stay in the presence of God continually.

Teatime and lunchtime are wonderful opportunities for the girls and women to socialise. Conversations, however, can all too easily develop into gossip or squabbles. And gossip can lead to misconceptions, insinuations or direct confrontations. Arguments or other interpersonal issues can also arise from very ordinary things such as little misunderstandings, habits which others find annoying, or simply bad moods. I have learned that talking with the individuals involved one-on-one is an effective way of restoring peace to such situations.

I have also learned that there are ways of turning break times into opportunities for wholesome enjoyment and at the same time for raising aspirations and standards of personal and social competence. Towards this end, we have developed a mentoring programme to address problems of low motivation, low confidence, lack of interpersonal skills, physical and mental sluggishness, apathy and aggression. In addition, my team organises a variety of activities during breaks

ranging from exercise, preparation of quick and easy meals, informal talks on human virtues or parenting and writing songs. We also try to positively influence the course of conversation in these moments, and react quickly to situations that can arise such as when someone begins to gossip, display offensive tabloids, or address her child in a rough or abusive manner. During teatime, I also try to seek out the new beneficiaries one-on-one in order to offer them my friendship and to make them feel at home². Many issues can arise in these informal conversations such as forgiveness, understanding, faith and hope that everything works out for good for those who love God, creating a vision for the future, the meaning of work, fidelity in marriage, assuming responsibility, planning and managing one's time, setting priorities, managing a budget, bringing out the best in each family or team member, punctuality, serenity, cheerfulness, study, order, cleanliness and care for material goods, personal hygiene, striving for excellence and self-respect.

After focusing beneficiaries on the acquisition of professional competence and Christian virtues, the challenge becomes one of raising standards. Standards for professional competence are set against national benchmarks and awards. Standards for Christian virtues are set against achievements of character needed to compete in the employment market or in seeking acceptance at university or school. Having acquired high standards for both profession and virtues, the beneficiary's path to integration will hopefully have generated a momentum of its own and she will be unlikely to return to the vicious cycle of dependency or deprivation for herself and for the next generation.

c) After the Baytree Training Integration as Baytree Staff; the Ripple Effect

Beneficiaries leave Baytree and progress on to further education or jobs. Some of them feel that they can now make a difference in the lives of other disadvantaged people by working with us. They are aware that they need to compete with other applicants and are proud to be chosen over internal and external applicants who apply for advertised positions. Once accepted as paid staff, their integration with mainstream society has begun. It is now their turn to use their talents to provide for themselves and give up dependency on government help, provide for the next generation, and help others who are still disadvantaged. Her challenge is to continue the struggle to perfect her professional competence and Christian virtues and use these to serve others and God with love.

² Cfr. *Christ is passing by*, 136.

Like the former beneficiaries who have joined us as Baytree staff, I like to think of each woman who has left Baytree to be like what Blessed Josemaría described as “a stone fallen into the lake. One ripple, then another, and another”³. One beneficiary who has acquired professional competence and Christian virtues to attain integration can pass on what she has learned to the next generation and to those around her. She too can raise both the material and the spiritual standards at home, work and wherever else she goes. In time, it will be possible to see the overall effect of having had everyone contribute to raising the standard of Christian living, in Brixton and beyond. The ripple effect can be infinite.

4. NEW HORIZONS OPENED

Baytree is a creative way of addressing inner city issues. It offers an alternative Christian family environment complementing the homes and schools of inner cities. For example, intergenerational mixing and visits to the elderly revive love and understanding between 2 or 3 generations, something commonly experienced in village life but not in inner cities. Some more specific examples of new horizons are: the *Fast Track to Literacy Scheme* to dramatically shorten the time beneficiaries need to achieve an employable level of literacy; *Mentoring* to allow one-on-one support; and *Healthy Living* as a practical resource for women’s family and professional life. We challenge young people so they start developing their potential and so that they actively choose not to become involved in the local culture of teenage pregnancy, expulsion from school, drugs and crime.

Baytree also generates local employment and can contribute further to finding work arrangements with a healthy work-life balance. In short, the Baytree enterprise can serve as a continuous source of human potential and endeavour, and of creative solutions in building social inclusion and integral human advancement in the community and beyond.

³ *The Way*, 831.