

Emmaus - a brief history



The first Companion



Georges, the first Companion.

The first Emmaus Community was founded in Paris in 1949 by Father Henri-Antoine Groues, better known as the Abbé Pierre, a Catholic priest, member of parliament and former member of the French Resistance

during the Second World War. As an MP, he fought to provide homes for those who lived on the streets of Paris.

One night, a man called Georges was brought to the Abbé Pierre. Georges had been released after 20 years in prison, only to find his family unable to cope with his reappearance. Homeless and despairing, he had tried to commit suicide in the Seine.

The Abbé Pierre did not just offer him a place to sleep. He asked for his help. He told Georges of the homeless mothers who came to him for help for them and their children and how he could not cope with the problem on his own. Could Georges join him in his mission to help them?

Georges became the first Emmaus Companion, living with the Abbé Pierre and helping him to build temporary homes for those in need, first in the priest's own garden, then wherever land could be bought or scrounged. He later said; **“Whatever else he might have given me – money, home, somewhere to work – I’d have still tried to kill myself**

again. What I was missing, and what he offered, was something to live for.”

“Ragpickers” of Paris

In 1951, Abbé Pierre resigned as an MP to devote himself to fighting homelessness and poverty. However, he had relied on his salary to pay for Georges and the 18 men who now formed the first Community and were still building homes for those who desperately needed them. So the former MP and resistance hero put on his cassock and his medals and toured the smart restaurants of Paris asking for donations.

The Companions, instead of being grateful, were outraged. They told Abbé Pierre firmly that begging compromised their – and his – self respect. Instead, to raise the money they needed, they became “rag pickers”, collecting things that people no longer wanted and selling them on. So the concept of Companions running self supporting businesses, with the profits going to those in greater need was born.



Abbé Pierre (right) on a rubbish tip in Paris, where Emmaus Companions found items to re-sell.



Funeral of the baby of a homeless couple, who froze to death in the night in January 1954, driving Abbé Pierre to make his radio appeal to the French nation.

Spreading the word

Emmaus Communities spread across France, as the Abbé Pierre brought the horrors faced by the poor to the world's attention. The winter of 1954 was brutal. One January day the Abbé Pierre learnt that the baby of a homeless couple had frozen to death in the night. Some days later he heard that an old woman had died of hypothermia on the streets having been evicted from her home.

Angered by these needless deaths, Abbé Pierre sent an open letter to newspapers and made a radio appeal to the nation. It turned Emmaus into a major international charity. The French public responded and gifts and support flooded in. Emmaus Communities opened across France. Abbé Pierre became an international figure and travelled the world spreading the word about Emmaus, causing Communities to be established in mainland Europe, French West Africa, the Far East and South America.

Each one retains the ideals of the first Communities - giving people the chance to support themselves and help others.

Emmaus in the UK

By 1990, when Emmaus arrived in Britain, there were already Emmaus Communities in 38 countries around the world.

It was inspired by a comment from a homeless man to a Cambridge business man, Selwyn Image. When Selwyn asked him what he wanted, the man replied: **“I want to work and belong. I want my self-respect back. I don't want to queue for hand-outs or have to beg for food. And I don't want people to cross the street to avoid me”.**

At that point, Selwyn remembered his time as a volunteer at an Emmaus Community in Paris while he was a student, 30 years before. He knew that he had to bring Emmaus to the UK.

Two years later, the first Emmaus Community in Britain opened near Cambridge. In the following year, work started to set up a Community in Coventry, and projects in London, Dover and Manchester followed closely behind. Emmaus Communities continue to be established in the UK, all based on the Abbé Pierre's founding principles of acceptance, sharing, working for others in greater need, and self-respect.



Abbe Pierre and Emmaus UK President Terry Waite on the Emmaus founder's visit to the UK in 1999, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Emmaus.

Find details of your nearest Emmaus shop on www.emmaus.org.uk or contact Emmaus UK
48 Kingston Street, Cambridge CB1 2NU - e: contact@emmaus.org.uk - t: 01223 576103

Emmaus UK is registered charity number 1064470 and a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales no 3422341