

Abbeyfield International

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Dear Friends,

If any subject fits perfectly into today's debate, it is the role of volunteers in the Abbeyfield movement and I thank the organisers for giving me the chance to present this worldwide project.

Brief history and origin of the name

Abbeyfield Street in London is where the first house was founded by a Colonel in the English Army to help war widows confronted with financial problems and the tragedies of solitude, isolation and insecurity. Today, 1,000 houses in England are managed by 10,000 motivated and competent volunteers.

This principle gradually spread to the Commonwealth countries, the USA, Japan, South Africa, Italy and the Netherlands. Belgium is the latest to join this "label" protected by the Abbeyfield Centre Charter:

- on the dignity of and respect for the elderly
- on their autonomy and recognition of their rights.

Operating principles

In terms of the cultures, mentalities, customs and social legislation in force in the different countries where Abbeyfield exists and has operated for years, we can single out its basic operating principles which make it possible to take up a large number of challenges:

- dealing with increasing life expectancy
- awareness of the role of ageing persons who are still active in their neighbourhood.

The basic principle everywhere is quite simple and resides on the initiative and responsibility of competent and motivated volunteers who organise their own work.

Creation of a local committee, which, observing need and urgency, decides to found a house in terms of local demand.

Search for a building that meets the following criteria: each inhabitant has private quarters and the use of the commons, where all daily activity takes place and where neighbours can be invited.

Financial responsibilities can be handled in different ways (donations - bequests - rental - purchase), the rent paid by each inhabitant reimbursing all or part of the investment.

Management - organisation of activities by residents and volunteers from the local committee.

Volunteering is the driving force of the entire Abbeyfield organisation in all countries. Living longer is obviously progress, but living better is the challenge to be met. Abbeyfield therefore proposes "a future-oriented project" that creates responsibility and motivates residents and volunteers alike.

Creativity and imagination are needed to remain flexible and to adapt to the group of residents in each house, respecting the freedom of every individual while establishing a convivial climate where everyone feels at home...

In some countries, volunteers are given specific training, for example, in listening, dispute management, the intergenerational approach and sponsoring. But the most important element for volunteers is the sense of commitment, knowing one is useful to others, developing activities that create bonds of friendship with the neighbourhood and between residents in a network of mutual assistance and solidarity.

All these elements maintain autonomy, good health and physical and psychological adjustment.

In conclusion, I cannot help but remark that in my 40 years as a volunteer at both Belgian and European level, it is in the Abbeyfield movement that I have found the greatest fulfilment and joy of life among residents and volunteers alike.

This spirit is moving and is reflected in the radiant faces of the residents happy to be living together in a family spirit - the best proof of their well-being is that 90% of them pass away peacefully, without specialised medical care, surrounded by affection.

As the philosopher Berger stated so well:

"Tomorrow's world will not be discovered, but invented, because it will be new."

May Abbeyfield be invented all over the world... that is my dream!

See original French text in the annex