

# Introduction

## A Short Description and History of L'Abri en Ville

L'Abri en Ville is a community supported housing project for those with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, depression, and bi-polar disorder. People with a serious mental illness need a continuum of care and housing. Our model meets a particular need along this continuum: L'Abri en Ville is not a group home, nor a halfway house. We provide long term housing and support for those who are stable and on medication. Our residents are followed by mental health workers, and have the capacity to grow in autonomy by learning all kinds of life skills.

Furthermore, the project addresses one of the major problems created by mental illness – isolation – by having three residents share an apartment that is at the centre of a circle of volunteers offering support and community. Most literature on mental illness points to the importance of supportive friendship and respect in the process of an individual's recovery.

L'Abri en Ville grew out of an interfaith organization of downtown Montreal churches: the Interchurch Social Service Planning Committee or ICSSPC. Its members met monthly to discuss and to act on local problems of injustice. In June, 1988, ICSSP guest speaker, Shelagh Coinner, presented her project, Create a Rehabilitative Environment or C.A.R.E., a long term community supported housing project for those with a serious mental illness. The members of ICSSPC were excited by the project's ability to make an enormous difference in the lives of those it served. They were so impressed by the project's community support, by its simplicity, and by its comparatively modest cost that they decided to put their energy into creating such a project in downtown Montreal. Of course, the dissemination of a suburban model in a city demanded rethinking; for example, each C.A.R.E. apartment was sponsored by one or two churches whose members lived near the church and the apartment. In contrast, the first apartment opened by L'Abri en Ville had four sponsoring faith communities whose members and apartment volunteers lived all over the city.

It took the members of ICSSPC two years to gain information about setting up such a project, to engage supportive faith communities, to gather more interested committee members, to find an established community organization that would give us advice and temporary office space, to form a legal board, and to raise enough seed money to print material and hire a part-time coordinator. The long and successful learning process led to the opening of L'Abri en Ville's first apartment in 1991. By extending our community to include more faith communities, friends, foundations, service clubs and companies in our area, we were able, over ten years, to open one apartment a year.

Our model, in brief, is as follows: Each three-bedroom apartment for three people is rented by L'Abri en Ville and nicely furnished. Volunteers from faith communities first come together in a series of training sessions to learn about the symptoms and treatment of mental illness, the kinds of daily housekeeping skills that residents may need help with, and the sorts of social activities that create friendship and community. When the apartment opens, volunteers then meet monthly as a team with the coordinator to plan activities that interest the residents. The residents have a weekly house meeting with the coordinator to discuss interests and problems, and may meet individually with the coordinator on an as-needed basis.

Today, L'Abri en Ville consists of ten apartments with thirty residents and over sixty volunteers. Many of those volunteers are active in one of the apartments and also on the board. Residents are board members too. With each new apartment and with the development of shared activities, residents make new friends, new connections, and are part of a rich and varied community.

What really makes L'Abri en Ville different from other sorts of long term housing is the role played by the surrounding community, especially the supporting faith communities. Our affinity with faith communities is natural: faith communities welcome the stranger. We are not, however, a religious organization. We do not proselytize nor do we choose our residents or volunteers on the basis of

religious adherence. However, most of our volunteers do come from faith communities, and L'Abri en Ville is considered part of the outreach of those congregations.

By linking different communities – faith communities, the medical community, the civic and social communities – with those who struggle with mental illness, the project serves the whole community, binding its members more closely. One of L'Abri en Ville's residents, Riccardo Ottoni, summed it up: "Once you have your inner circle, you can feel more confident when you go out into society. That breaks society's stereotypes about people with mental illness. It improves the whole community, I'd say."

### *The Idea of Disseminating the L'Abri Model*

Inherent in the strength of our model is that the circle of community that supports our residents is small enough for intimacy and large enough for variety. If we were to grow beyond our present number of under one hundred people, we would face problems of estrangement and hierarchy, both antithetical to community.

But still, the need for supportive housing is pressing. Since L'Abri en Ville disseminated successfully from the C.A.R.E. model, we believe that its simplicity can be repeated again by people of good will and possessing skills that are present in any community. In 2001 our president, Nancy Grayson, saw that applying for a grant from the Federal Government to combat homelessness (HRDC's Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative) was an opportunity to begin our work of dissemination. We set up a steering committee as an advisory group, and hired a coordinator for the project. One of L'Abri's coordinators gave part of her work time to the project. The mandate of the Dissemination Project under the terms of the grant was to write a guidebook, create a website and most importantly, to help new groups within Quebec to develop their own projects.

### *About Dissemination*

Under the HRDC grant, L'Abri en Ville accompanied two new groups within Quebec: Our Harbour and Les toits d'Émile. In 2005, we received a new grant from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, encouraging us to continue our work with these groups and to explore the possibilities of working with other groups within Canada.

The conditions for our working with a new group are: 1) that you accept the model described in the guidebook and in particular, the fundamental inclusion of faith communities;

2) that you have gathered around you a number of people dedicated to the purpose of launching an independent organization; and

3) that you have considered how to approach your local health, psychiatric and faith communities.

### *The Origins and Writing of the Guidebook*

When L'Abri en Ville was first setting up, we had the help of Shelagh Coinner of the C.A.R.E. project. Shelagh responded to our telephone calls for help, and shared her M.A. thesis on the project. By combining her experience with our own of 15 years, we are now able to delineate the structure and record our own experience in this guidebook. The guidebook is partly historical in nature; that is, it documents what we have learned along the way. The process of writing and editing was also a process of consultation and clarification, particularly since the guide was written while working with the two new groups. Our work with them was not just sharing our documentation and advice: we were involved in many activities with them, accompanying them to meetings with faith communities, for example. Thus, the guidebook is also a product of our own reflection on how L'Abri en Ville works as we responded to the disseminating groups. Knowing that any organization will evolve over time, we formatted this guidebook in a binder to allow both L'Abri en Ville and new groups to add and change pages. In this first revision (January 2006), we have been guided by comments from users in updating and adding useful documents both in written and electronic form.

A guidebook by its nature is directive and therefore in order to convey the joy of our project, we have included stories from residents, volunteers and coordinators in Section 3: The Spirit of L'Abri. These stories can also be found on our website ([www.labrienville.org](http://www.labrienville.org)).

### *The Structure of the Guidebook*

The guidebook is divided into three sections.

Section 1 is called Beginnings and describes the kinds of contacts that a new group must make in order to gain support and build credibility over time, in part through the use of outreach materials. It also includes the steps for setting up a working board as a legal structure and for qualifying as a federal charity. This section concludes with a chapter on financing, and shows how fundraising can be a community building process.

Section 2 is called Daily Life and focuses on the roles and activities of the coordinators, volunteers and residents in and around the apartment setting. This section offers new groups the kind of details they need to understand how the interactions of these roles produce a cohesive community. Each of the chapters in Sections 1 and 2 contains references to documents used by L'Abri en Ville. These can be found in the appendices of the guidebook.

Section 3 is called The Spirit of L'Abri. This spirit is revealed in articles, poems and stories, many of which have appeared in newsletters over the past 12 years.

### *Benefiting from the Guidebook*

Our experience with new groups has shown us that we cannot necessarily expect a rigorous and sequential reading of the guidebook. Still, we know that certain knowledge is essential at particular points in the evolution of a project. We are working on ways of creating learning possibilities at key points, both through our website and through personal contacts with experienced members of L'Abri en Ville.

### *L'Abri en Ville Website as Resource*

*[www.labrienville.org](http://www.labrienville.org)*

The body of the guidebook is available on our website for reference purposes. The appendices are accessible to new groups who may wish to download and adapt these practical materials for their own use.

To help new groups visualize the process of launching a new effort, a flow chart has been created. A version of this flowchart is used on the website to guide users to relevant material in the guidebook. A printed version can be found on the next page.

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