

October 2011 – Did you know?

The image of Ireland that many Americans cherish is far from today's reality. That said, one important truth remains: In Ireland, people still matter. At least for now! (Thus, the owner who closed up so he could guide the American guests personally to my brother's house!)

Although current economic hardships have led the government to cut back on the social safety net, many good things remain. Senior citizens of a certain age have free bus and train transport, assistance with their electricity and telephone bills, and a reduced TV license fee. (Yes, one has to pay a yearly fee to have a TV!)

Those caring for incapacitated folks get an allowance, and there exists an enviable system of carers' support groups. Until recently, families were given an allowance for each child until age 18. That has been reduced in the current budget.

Still, does our image of Ireland encompass the existence of homelessness? Before the demise of the Celtic Tiger, official government figures showed that 2,399 households were categorized as homeless in 2005, with an additional 9,212 households living in one or another unsuitable situation.

The Simon Communities of Ireland arose to serve this population.

The Simon Community was founded in London in 1963 by Anton Wallich-Clifford, who realized that the problems of those without a home were not solved by a hostel bed, that being homeless is also about a lack of security, lack of belonging, lack of privacy and lack of safety. What was needed, he believed, was a service based on "Caring and Campaigning", exemplifying the possibility of a different, caring society.

The first Simon Community in Ireland was set up by students from Trinity College and University College Dublin in 1969 who had heard Wallich-Clifford speak. There are now eight Simon Communities around the country. Although each is independent, they are loosely affiliated and staffed by over 800 volunteers.

In addition to providing quality care, accommodation, projects and services, which support people and enable them to acquire and sustain an appropriate home of their own, Simon campaigns for legislative and policy changes and resources that will deliver on a right to housing and responsive services for people who have no homes.

One unique feature is the collaborative partnerships with those who use their services, as well as all those who work towards the elimination of homelessness. Another was expressed by a leader in the Dublin community: "The Simon Community takes the initiative, goes out to meet people rather than waiting for them to come."

Simon believes no one chooses to be homeless, that homelessness is not, and should never be accepted as, an inevitable outcome for any person.