(In 2001 a team of volunteers from the Brussels neighborhood of Koekelberg, under the leadership of the Assumptionists, launched an innovative initiative: accompanying individuals in need as they went through required administrative hoops to receive social services. The idea, simple though it may have been, answered a real need. In 15 years this non-profit organization, called “Accompagner” has lent a hand to more than 6,000 people. At the 2011 general chapter of the Assumptionists it was named one of 7 'mobilizing works' of the institute, works that, by virtue of the nature and quality of their work, serve as flagship ministries deserving of widespread support and imitation throughout the Congregation.)



Accompagner volunteers and staff

An Interview with its Founder and Director, Fr. Guy Leroy:

- Fr. Guy, how is Accompagner doing?

- Too well….unfortunately!

- Why do you say, « Unfortunately »?

- This year volunteers and salaried staff have been extraordinarily dedicated to the cause of the neediest. We have “accompanied » more than a thousand people to various sites, 1037 to be exact. More than 70 volunteers have taken part. This number has been rising each year and this is the first year we have broken a thousand. More than 100 other organizations have requested our help. Unfortunately, this means that poverty and insecurity are increasing in Belgium, and in Brussels in particular.

- You mentioned more than 70 ‘companion’ volunteers although at times you also used the number closer to 40.

- Yes, on average, we have about 40 volunteers available at any given moment to do the work. There is a large turnover among the volunteers. Many young people do not stay for a long time. The fact that they’re able to get back into the professional world renews their confidence and employers’ confidence in them. After a few months they are able to get back into the work world. For them Accompagner becomes a springboard to full-time employment. Fortunately, we’re always getting new volunteers.

- More poverty, more work ---- how have you seen Accompagner evolve?

- Well, one can’t do everything. We aren’t the saviors of the world. But when we promise someone that we will take care of him, we try to finish the job. There is always a temptation for us to think that we have no limits. We do! That’s why we insist on people making appointments. Given the number of people now knocking on our door, it takes two or three weeks to get an appointment. Nevertheless, we do make exceptions for emergency cases that we squeeze into our schedules.

- Why are more and more people coming to you? What are you doing more than others?

- They come to us having knocked already at many doors. It’s like Accompagner is their last resort, as if they say before coming, “You never know”. In a society where social services are becoming more and more specialized, our philosophy is to get to know the whole person and all his/her needs. Then we try to establish connections between them and all the various individual services they need. Going with them personally, accompanying them, from place to place is a real value added. The ‘companion’ volunteer is like a lame man’s crutch the advocate for the

fearful, the memory of the forgetful, etc. They help people to take more responsibility for themselves, to have more confidence in themselves, and discover what they can do on their own.

- What is your specific role, Fr. Guy?

- My role is to make sure this initiative continues and that its founding spirit is never lost. I have two excellent collaborators who help me in this role, Gérard and Roger. It is extremely rewarding but requires a lot of heart, hope, perseverance and patience, not to mention a sense of humor. We are also blessed with incredibly generous volunteers!