

THE SOCIETY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



The Society has been in existence since 1866. Here are some quotes:

"rendered homeless..... financially stretched..... facing financial hardship..... declared bankrupt..... they survive but only just..... this family are in serious financial distress..... minimal income and all their savings have dried up..... I have not seen another family living in such basic conditions..... her financial situation appears to be fairly bleak..... the grant will help provide food and clothing etc. for the children's needs"

But these are not quotes from the nineteenth century, but from the twenty-first century. The suffering of families and children in our Presbyterian community is as real today as it was 150 years ago. Here are a few comments from exceptional grant applications made by ministers on behalf of families.

"This child, one of three children, has no parent to care for them. The mother is not in the family home and the father is unable to help". "Due to long-term illness and the sudden drop in income, this family and their children are being taken to court and the family home is threatened with repossession". "This family have multiple health problems and are surviving on welfare". "This family, with three children, are in the middle of a financial crisis. The father has lost his job, there is no work and they are in arrears on the mortgage".

These comments are indicative of the need that still exists today.

Relative Poverty and Welfare Issues

Much of the recent debate on welfare and poverty has concentrated on a negative portrayal of families receiving welfare. The media have, at times accentuated those who are work-shy, dependent and irresponsible, and a deeply unattractive caricature of a feral underclass of scroungers has been unfair and unjust to many in genuine need and distress. Whilst such a portrayal is geared to showing how different these people are from ourselves, the truth is more unsettling.

The Society recently looked at a small sample of our applications to ascertain if the media image reflected the reality of those receiving our help. A very different profile emerged. Indications are that over half of our recipients are in jobs, albeit low paid jobs, sometimes barely paying a living wage. Many of our recipients, far from being work-shy, are struggling as best they can to be in work and juggle the needs of work and children and sometimes traumatic circumstances. Many other recipients face benefit cuts and at the same time the rising costs of some of the basics of subsistence. The harsh economic realities have presented stark choices in terms of meeting basic human needs. These people are not very different to you or me – we are perhaps only one traumatic lifetime event away from being in a similar situation to these families.

If the attitude to work and the motivations of our recipients are dissimilar to the media stereotype of the work-shy and indolent, so is the sense of belonging and community involvement. Once again our applications portray individuals who are engaged with their families and their own Presbyterian community. Our recipients are coping with financial crises and hardship with resilience and ingenuity. They are parents, grandparents, carers, homemakers, breadwinners, helpers, members and leaders of organisations in their congregations. Many are heavily involved in their local communities. I have been both amazed and encouraged that many families who are undergoing such hardship and suffering still give so much to the church in terms of themselves and their talents. This surely is true reciprocity, the church helping and the church being helped by those in need. Our applications are witness to the fact that many who receive our help are just the same as everyone else in the church, except for the life event that sometimes, overnight, adversely transforms their circumstances. Again the reality is at odds with the caricatured media image of disengagement and irresponsibility.

Meeting Need in 2016

From its inception in 1866 the Society has taken its responsibility to help Presbyterian families and their children extremely seriously. It has a biblical mandate to help the orphan, widow and alien which equates today to those who are powerless and whose basic needs require to be met to fulfil their full potential in society.

In 2016 we will help Presbyterian children and their families by providing well over half a million pounds in grants to meet need. The money which is given in the context of relationship and reciprocity, is given not only for immediate relief but also to help families strengthen their capacity to change their lives and that of their children in the future.

Your Response – Help Change a Life

The Society is in the 'business' of changing lives in a positive way. We can help change lives and we have the means, through our unique relationship with ministers and straightforward, efficient and confidential grants system, delivering help simply and swiftly. However, we rely on Presbyterians individually and as congregations to generously respond to make our work possible. We will always face financially challenging times. However, as one recipient said, it was great how people she would never ever know had given financially to help her in her situation. Perhaps this sums up how a community of God should relate to one another – quietly, anonymously, unobtrusively and generously.

Some years ago I wrote a short article with the title "Is a family worth more than a box of cereal?" Of course the answer was yes!, though I indicated that in a number of the congregations where we have provided help, giving to the Society averaged less than the price of a packet of breakfast cereal. On the other hand helping each family we help costs at least £1,000 per person per annum, in many cases substantially more and we help around 400 families with 700 children in over 200 congregations.

How should we respond? Many of us would never dream of donating only one box of cereal to a foodbank let alone to a family in need in our area. Perhaps God might be calling us to prayerfully respond to the needs of Presbyterian families and their children by supporting the Society with a little more than the price of a packet of cereal.

