

Compassion & care at Christmas



Jason Nicholson highlights the work of the Presbyterian Children's Society.

Today, when many people think about Christmas, they often associate it with popular on-screen characters such as Buddy the elf, the Grinch, Scrooge, or even the Muppets. However, the very first Christmas is marked by a different cast of characters. We discover that those on the edges find themselves at the centre of the action, and the unimportant are given starring roles. In contrast to Hollywood, the Holy Scriptures present a different narrative; one in which the world is turned upside down, or rather right side up.

It's a distinctive and engaging story in which we encounter many varied individuals – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Wise Men – each one trying to navigate their way through a world that had almost lost its sense of hope. Theirs was a world not unlike ours today.

Fear to favour

Mary, one of our central characters, was a young woman from an obscure town called Nazareth. It was uncelebrated, often characterised by a common Jewish sentiment in the first century: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46).

Yet here, in this sleepy town, preparing to be married, Mary received life-changing news: “The angel said to her, ‘Mary, do not be afraid. You have found favour with God. See! You are to become a mother and have a son. You are to give him the name Jesus’” (Luke 1:30–31).

In response, she nervously asked: “How can this happen?” (v34). Her plans had been interrupted and at that moment, despite any heavenly reassurance, Mary didn't yet fully understand all that would eventually unfold.

Like Mary, many of the applications to the Society for help detail similar unforeseen interruptions. Situations which may be far less dramatic than Mary's, but no less difficult. Whether it's a widow caring for three children, or a father experiencing long-term illness, the Society, for almost 160 years, has helped many Presbyterian

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children and their families through challenging times.

Faith to action

Practical help, complemented by congregational pastoral care, is essential. The Apostle James clearly understood this biblical principle of care: “What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, ‘Good bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well’ – but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless” (James 2:14–17).

Eugene Patterson's paraphrase helps to convey powerfully the necessity to do something when confronted by need: “...God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense”.

For Mary, her thoughts turned quickly to action: "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say" (Luke 1:38).

Mary gave her body to bear God's Son (Luke 1:26–38). She relinquished her own ambitions and submitted to God's plan. The Christmas story is one of faith-in-action, and so too is the Christian life. It's also a story about a great arrival; presence not presents!

Presence not presents

Christmas is God's reminder that he is with us; a promise provided both at Jesus' birth, and later before his ascension to heaven: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Just as Mary was reassured on her journey to Bethlehem by Joseph's presence, we too are comforted, when facing tough times, by the presence and support of others. The Society, through its regular and exceptional grants, helps to illustrate this important principle.

Providing grants to support around 910 children in 440 families, the Society espouses compassion and fosters a sense of belonging to a Christian community that cares. It is this symbolism and the generous spirit with which the Society administers its grants that is a key aspect of its continued relevance. Beginning its work in 1866 by helping 175 'orphans' (27 of whom had lost both parents), the Society is today helping children from a wide range of backgrounds, including bereavement, separation and divorce, single parenthood, disability, long-term hospital care, prison or unemployment. In every case, our intention is to 'get alongside' families, and to demonstrate unqualified compassion and care. On receiving their grant, one child poignantly remarked, "Mum, the Church did not fail us when we needed them most."

There for you...

Another important feature of the Christmas story is availability, captured

brilliantly in the surprising stage appearance of the lowly shepherds.

Smelling like sheep, and looking just as woolly, shepherds were often overlooked because of their social status. They were conscientious, willing to spend the night with their flocks. We won't, however, find their staffs in a museum, or their writings in a library. Despite this, the angels reserved their most magnificent announcement for these most unlikely of recipients.

Today, throughout PCI, ministers care for their flocks of people with

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the same quiet dedication to service.

As under-shepherds to the Great Shepherd, our ministers and other pastoral personnel sensitively administer grants on behalf of the Society. They are not mere conduits, but rather gatekeepers, guarantors of confidentiality and faithful pastoral carers. This willingness to be available is critical in getting support out to families when they need it most.

Caring community

Motivated to serve by the Apostle Paul's 'body-community' motif in 1 Corinthians 12:26, and supported by our ministers who, like the shepherds in the fields over Bethlehem, 'keep watch', the Society remains committed to meeting the needs of Presbyterian children and young people.

Giving to meet the needs of others in our Presbyterian community is essential, especially during these economically challenging times. Last year, the Society provided £680,000 in grants to Presbyterian families in need. This year, the need for sustaining and increasing our income is even greater. May we, like the shepherds, who hurried to Bethlehem to greet their new-born King, display the same sense of urgency to support the needs of children and young people of our Church.

Jason Nicholson is Executive Secretary of the Presbyterian Children's Society.



COMPASSION FOR CHILDREN
CARE FOR FAMILIES

In 2023, we gave £679,438 in grants to help Presbyterian children.

Today, we currently help around 910 children in 450 Presbyterian families throughout Ireland.

Please make a donation to support our ongoing work.

 **Presbyterian Children's Society**

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