

DOING GOOD BECAUSE WE SHOULD – CHRISTIAN PHILANTHROPY

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



Christian philanthropy is concerned as much with the rich as it is with the poor. Some have alluded to, or hinted at, a “deserving poor”. There is, however, little ever said of whether or not there are “deserving rich”. One insightful comment challenges us that “what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice the problem of riches”.

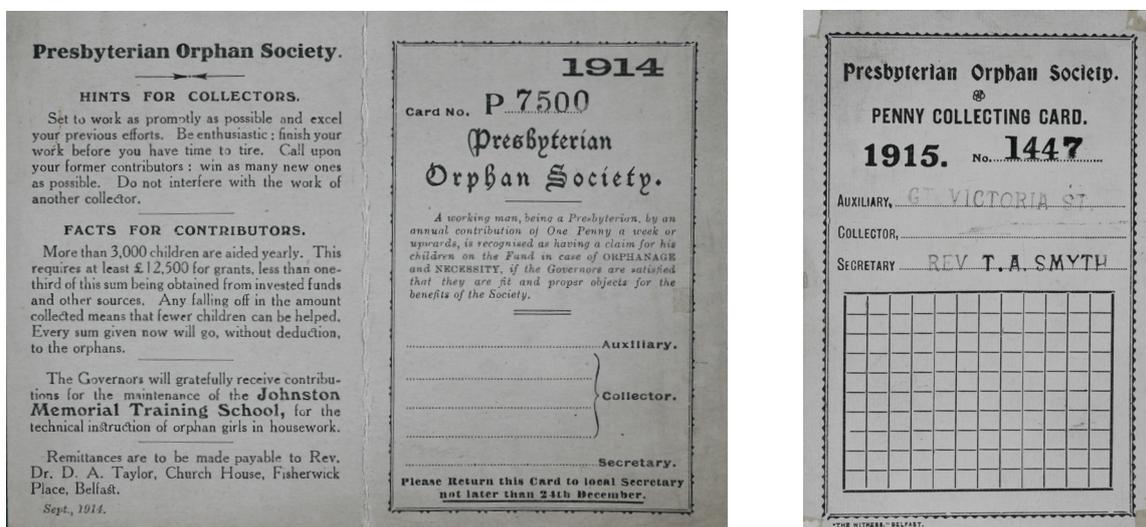
Community, Compassion and Grace

The Society obeys the biblical injunction to minister to individuals and it does so without reservation. We start with individuals, both donors and recipients, as part of a community of Christ, namely the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The concept of community is a difficult one. Nevertheless, it is I think possible to talk at a very basic level of Presbyterians as a Christian community which shares a stable though not necessarily a homogeneous set of moral values. Within this Presbyterian community the Society has worked best in circumstances where it has worked independently from the state and has not sought to change people’s behaviour. The Presbyterian Church itself may see its role to change the behaviour of individuals to conform to the image of Christ. However, it could be argued that the Society is not a vehicle of evangelism but rather a servant of Grace, alleviating hardship and distress under a sacred canopy of compassion. In this role of administering welfare without stigma the Society’s modus operandi is at odds with various social thinkers who see the task of welfare as changing behaviour. It is, however, more akin to an unconditional welfare with its emphasis on redistributing resources, lessening inequalities and encouraging integration and fellowship.

Charitable Giving and Christian Giving

If we accept that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is a Christian community which has the Society as an instrument of grace and compassion to those in need, what is the responsibility of individual Presbyterians to maintain the Society?

There is a biblical responsibility to provide for members of the church in need (Acts 2 v 44-45; 4 v 32-35) (James 1 v 27) (James 2 v 15-16) and to give according to their means (2 Corinthians 8 v 3 and 11). Giving should be commensurate with our wealth (Acts 11 v 29, 2 Corinthians 8 v 12-14) and there should be no differentiation between those who give much and those who give little (Mark 12 v 41-44). Other Old Testament passages (Deuteronomy 15) underline these messages relayed in the New Testament.



Pinhole collecting cards, 1914 -15.

There are many other references in both Old and New Testaments to the poor and 'social justice'. A common thread in the understanding of the nature of charitable giving in a Christian context is that of obligation and community. This is not a narrow political understanding (or misunderstanding) of obligation and community but rather what God expects in doing our duty to those within our Christian community, and taking such obligations in our Christian community seriously.

Reciprocation and Community

The Society occupies a unique role within the Presbyterian community to receive charitable giving from that community and fulfil the obligations to those in need within the community by distributing grants. This is not, however, to argue that this process is necessarily one way. There are those who may not be in a position to give financially and who need and indeed receive financial help from the Society and from other agencies or individuals. They may, however, give back to others in non-financial ways such as their gifts allow. This is true reciprocation within the Christian community of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, an extension of grace modelled on God's grace freely given and inviting, though not expecting reciprocation.

“What shall we render unto Him for all His goodness, ought to be the language of our hearts”!

The founders of the Society were passionate about making a difference. The quote from Dr Wilberforce Arnold above, one of the founders of the Society in the language of the time, conveys an urgency and passion for the work. It was said of him that “he was animated with an earnest sympathy for human suffering and when he took up the cause of the orphans he threw himself into it with all the ardent enthusiasm of his nature”. Of Dr William Johnston, another founder, it was said that his name “will long remain unmoved from the annals of active philanthropy as it continues to scatter its manifold mercies among the inmates of many desolate hearths and homes”. William Brown, the permanent Secretary of the Society from 1881 to 1917, has his work in a testimonial referred to as “labours of love on behalf of the fatherless and the orphans”. Of Mrs Johnston, wife of the founder Dr William Johnston, it was said that her fundraising letters to congregations “all over the Church wakened up the lagging, encouraged those doing well to do better still.... (and) stirred those who thought they had done their best to surpass them”. The language may be antiquated in these contemporary descriptions but the import is clear. These were people who were passionately focused and gave freely to this Christian work. It was not just in the upper echelons of the organisation, however, that there was such enthusiasm.

A photograph, a book and a letter in the Society's archive tell the story of one woman who collected for the Society in the early 1900's. The letter tells her story, how she became a monitress (teacher) when she was just 13 years of age. The book was a prize awarded in 1904 to her for collecting for the Society and the picture is of her proudly beside her bicycle which she bought when she became a monitress. Collecting by the family was carried on for two generations by her niece and grand- nieces. In the recent past there have been collectors and secretaries who have been honoured by the Society for long service in congregations. These collectors and Secretaries have been involved with the Society for many years, in various cases 30, 40 or 50 years, in some cases people have been honoured who have collected for 60 and even 70 years. There are many today who give selflessly to the Society in terms of time, money and energy to make a difference, help create community, show compassion and act as instruments of Grace.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Today there are many thousands of charities and philanthropic organisations. Why support the work of the Society? Perhaps this is best answered by calling us back to our idea of a Christian community. We are all called to promote such a community which operates under Grace and helps us to give as we are able, to enable compassion and meet each others needs in reciprocation, not as passive individuals, but as equal participants.



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