

# HELPING PRESBYTERIAN CHILDREN IN THE YEARS BEFORE THE SOCIETY – PARISH, POORHOUSE AND FOUNDLING HOSPITAL

**ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN**

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



Life for many individuals and particularly children in Ireland could be a precarious business in the first half of the nineteenth century. With no welfare as we would understand it today, provision was minimal and punitive. For abandoned, poor and destitute children the future was bleak and although there was some charity provision this was piecemeal at best. Provision of any kind was stretched by deteriorating social conditions due to population increase and crop failures particularly during the period of the Great Famine 1845 – 1851. In these perilous times how were destitute Presbyterian children helped before the foundation of the Society? There were few choices available. The main provision was through the foundling hospitals the main one being in Dublin, through the local Parish or Congregation setting or by seeking refuge in the poorhouse.

## Foundling Hospitals

In the early nineteenth century it was noted that many of the children admitted to the Foundling Hospital in Dublin were from northern counties. It seems likely that at least some children of Presbyterian origin were admitted to that institution. It was not, however, a place of safety. A report of enquiry found that over a 30 year period (1796 – 1826) of 52,000 infants received, 32,000 had died and about 9,600 others who could not be accounted for were also thought to have died. It was a place of last resort and for many it turned out to provide little refuge.

## Parish

There was no legal provision for the maintenance of orphan children. A commission in the 1830's suggested that they were normally taken into the care of friends or relatives. Sometimes, however, after a catastrophe such as an epidemic or famine, orphans would find difficulty surviving, when resources were few and sympathy all but exhausted, and in various instances they were forced to beg. At a local level it should not be thought that the Presbyterian Church did nothing for widows and orphans before 1866. Old Session records show that congregations did what they could to help the poor and the orphan. The child born outside of marriage was also supported and though there was censure applied to 'offenders' by the Congregation i.e. the parents, it was both parents who were held accountable, not just the mother, which was the case elsewhere. Whilst care was given by the Presbyterian Church to destitute children of all types, as the church became more structured the care had to move from a congregational to a central church level. Before the Society was founded the Protestant Orphan Society (Church of Ireland) could care for Presbyterian orphan children, but if these children were helped they would have to be brought up within the Church of

*“These little lone ones cannot plead for themselves. If they tried to do so their feeble voices would not be heard outside the big walls of union workhouses, nurseries of vice as we know them in very truth to be, in which many of these little ones live, and in which not a few of them die.”*

**Dr Wilberforce Arnold, 1865**

Ireland. Whilst not the ideal for Presbyterians it would at least keep them from the Poorhouse; a place which filled so many people with dread and fear.

## Poorhouse

The Irish Poor Relief Act of 1838 gave rise to the workhouse system. In 1841 out of 130 proposed workhouses or poorhouses, 12 were completed. By the end of 1842 the workhouse system was, however, well on its way to completion. The poorhouse was, as with the Foundling Hospital, a place of last resort. Life there was regulated and severely disciplined. The poorhouse uniform was rough, the food - stirabout, milk, potatoes, soup and brown bread - was barely adequate and beds were merely raised platforms covered with straw. There was a lack of water, two tubs for toilet facilities, which usually overflowed and there was poor ventilation. The majority of destitute children were set to work in the poorhouse where they were treated harshly and raised in squalid conditions. In the early years the number of children under fifteen years of age was over fifty per cent of poorhouse inmates. By the early twentieth century the percentage had decreased to around thirteen per cent. After the 1850's, due to perceived and actual horrors of the poorhouse environment, various denominations became involved in caring for orphan and destitute children in environments more conducive to the mental and physical health of children.

## “For Life’s Dark Hours”

In 1906 the Society’s Annual Report noted that “in dealing with life as we find it, we must take account of the dark hours.....indeed if we would be of use in the world, we need to take special note of them, so as to be ready to step in, when the darkness falls, and offer comfort and help. If we were to seek a motto for this Presbyterian Orphan Society, it might be written in words like these, ‘For Life’s Dark Hours’”

The Society was to come into existence as a response to the inadequacies of both state and church to cater properly for the orphan and destitute child. Foundling hospitals had proved lethal, parishes inadequate and poorhouses harsh and utterly unsuitable. There had to be more humane alternatives and the Society was one such alternative. A local Secretary in 1916 wrote that, “ Behind me in church sits a little family of six children, never absent, well clothed, well cared for, happy and healthy, who but for our Society would be in the workhouse. Often I think as I look at them they are worth the whole cost of the Society, and I become pardonable proud of my Church, for this is surely Christianity in excelsis.” This contemporary commentator clearly perceived in the Society’s work not just the outworking of the humane but also intimations of the Divine.



Credit: Belfast Central Mission

## The Relevance Today

What is the relevance of all of this for us today? It appears remarkable to us today that children were so harshly treated and yet many viewed it as acceptable and even morally defensible. Perhaps we can learn some lessons from our not so distant past. The well intentioned but inadequate local and state provision can pose questions for us today in terms of who we view as vulnerable, the provision that we make and how we can become blind to the suffering of others.