

'LEFT HOLDING THE BABY' FROM UNMARRIED MOTHERS TO SINGLE PARENTS

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations



In Ireland a higher incidence of births outside marriage has been historically associated with Ulster which had a different cultural emphasis to the rest of the island. Under the penal laws the Anglican Church disregarded Presbyterian marriages and declared children of such unions outside marriage, illegitimate. Presbyterians, however, viewed their marriages and children as legitimate and exercised discipline in the eighteenth century within congregations which was the envy of Anglicans.

The Kirk Session maintained discipline in matters of baptism and, where a birth was outside marriage it was deemed desirable to know the name of the father. Steps were taken to bring male and female 'offenders' before the Session and there would be public penance before the Congregation in such cases. Discipline concerning births outside marriage diminished during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but was still administered in some Congregations until the twentieth century. Church courts have been caricatured in the past for their apparent prurience and pursuit and punishment of couples whose misdemeanours were not of a major nature. Sessions, however, wished to see justice done, the child outside marriage supported, and, in such proceedings there appears a remarkable egalitarianism with regard to equal treatment before the Session of men and women, clergy and laity and master and servant alike.

Disapproval – Church Mirroring Society

Births outside marriage or illegitimacy, as it was known throughout the nineteenth and for a considerable part of the twentieth century, was dealt with unsympathetically for much of that time by Irish society. The message emanating from government officials and workhouse functionaries was one of disapproval and disdain. The church did not fare much better. In 1896 the Society's records state that for one family the grant was "to be suspended until the elder sister's illegitimate children shall be removed from the dwelling." In 1897 it was noted "This boy's mother refuses to part from her illegitimate grandchild – suspension of grant confirmed." In 1900 one reference draws attention to the fact that a grant was "restored on the condition that it be made certain that the illegitimate child shall not share in it." As late as 1941 the attitude persists, the record stating that it was agreed to restore a grant "inasmuch as cost of illegitimate child residing in the same house was being covered by payments received from mother, an older sister of these children."

These attitudes appear harsh but they reflected prevailing attitudes to births outside marriage in Ireland for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century. There was a moral disapprobation that followed unmarried mothers and their children, rooted not just in church disapproval, but also ingrained in a society based on the importance of land and inheritance and values of rural community. For much of the period the prospects for the unmarried mother and her child were bleak in a world where contravention of norms of behaviour were doubly disdained by church and state.

'Unmarried mothers' form.

Changing Attitudes

At the Society's Annual Meeting in 1931 Professor Robert Corkey addressed the issue suggesting that in relation to those born outside marriage "perhaps the time had come when (the) church might feel drawn to attempt something on behalf of that unfortunate group of children." It took over a decade, but the Annual Report of 1943 records the decision of the Governors to extend grants to the children of unmarried mothers. In 1944 three of the speakers at the Society's Annual General Meeting extolled the virtue of this course of action.

It is difficult to gauge the factors that contributed to this change in attitude. The upsurge in births outside marriage during World War Two together with the dislocations and uncertainties of the times may have made a contribution. A shift in attitude throughout the century to the unmarried mother, from sinner and institution inmate to sinned against and neurotic victim enabled disapproval and punishment of unmarried motherhood to be replaced progressively by the view that whilst it was still wrong it was akin to an illness. The search for psychological weakness or illness in the mother was a flawed one, but it enabled society to "treat" some "condition" and show compassion without attributing blame. In 1948 an application to the Society noted the mother was a "good respectable girl but without strong character". In 1961 another application states the mother was a "good soul-weak.....more sinned against than sinning". These remarks would have been imbued with current values and attitudes. Whilst attitudes change at different times in different places within Ireland, the 1960's were to be a turning point and, thereafter births outside marriage progressively took on a new meaning as cohabitation become more prevalent.

From Unmarried Mother to Single Parent

In the not so distant past the Society had a specific application form for unmarried mothers. Whilst there was also a separate form for disabled fathers, the form for an unmarried mother appears to put moral distance between this category and others, with its requirement for a special resolution by the Session of a local Congregation. Of course the Society has no such distinctions today, but it is intriguing that society's attitudes to the unmarried mother should have permeated, albeit in a diluted form, the procedures of the Society.

Society's attitudes to births outside marriage from the 1960's onwards certainly changed. With psychological theories discredited single parenthood became progressively a lifestyle choice with stigma increasingly absent. In addition the meaning of births outside marriage changed. Many couples were no longer concerned about what the institution of marriage conferred on children and definitions of their children as "illegitimate" no longer contained a moral charge or stigma. Many births outside marriage in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty first were to couples in stable or unstable unions. The moral panic over "illegitimacy" was to disappear and the idea of the "unmarried mother" and her "illegitimate child" as pariahs was consigned to history, or so it would have appeared.

Single Parents and the Welfare Dependency Debate

Single mothers have come to the fore yet again in the welfare dependency debate. Since the 1990's there have been, not wholly unsuccessful attempts to blame single parents for society's ills. Polemicists and politicians have again focused on births outside marriage as an indicator of societal breakdown. Whilst the debate has generated considerable interest the conclusions drawn are highly contested and there is unlikely to be a consensus on their validity. Perhaps the best way forward might be to state categorically that the use of an historical and statistical measure that labels children on the basis of their parents' marital state needs to be avoided. In addition de-problematising single parents and instead assisting them as parents seems a sensible and Christian thing to do. Today the Society helps and will continue to help any single parents who require financial aid showing them the love of Christ in a positive way. There are no "illegitimate" children today just children in need of assistance.