Voluntary beginnings

Social Work and the Voluntary Sector was the theme of a Social Work History Network (SWHN) event earlier this year, citing significant examples of the relevance of the latter to the former over the past 140 years.

Expert speakers were on hand to draw out the historical links, including Jim Richards, lately director of the Catholic Children’s Society (Westminster Diocese), and Alan Lewis, chief executive officer of the Liverpool Charitable Voluntary Society.

Drawing on a 2009 publication, Changing Times, Changing Needs: a History of the Catholic Children’s Society [J. Hyland], Jim Richards focussed on two areas of the Society’s history – the Curtis Committee and child migration. He outlined the Society’s role in the Report of the Care of Children Committee, September 1946, which arose largely following the tragic death of Dennis O’Neill in 1945. Dennis was a Catholic whose local authority in Wales had sent him to live with foster carers in Shropshire after being unable to find a placement with a Catholic family in his home area. Just six months later Dennis died after suffering repeated blows to the chest. He was also found to have been malnourished and to have suffered appalling neglect.

Concern
This tragedy caused deep concern in Catholic circles, as illustrated in correspondence between the Archbishops of Cardiff and Westminster. They wanted to ensure changes were made and with this aim the Archbishops of Westminster gained the home secretary’s agreement that one member of the body set up to review how Dennis’ death had been allowed to happen – the Curtis Committee, led by Myra Curtis – would be nominated by the Catholic Church. That representative was Helen Murtagh, a Birmingham city councillor and health visitor.

The issue of whether a child should be placed with foster parents of his or her religious persuasion was highly controversial and Mrs Murtagh kept this issue high on the agenda of the Committee’s work. When it came to publish its report the Committee recommended that where possible a child should be placed with foster parents of the same religion but that a child should not be kept in an unsuitable environment in circumstances where this was unavailable. Mrs Murtagh and five other members of the Committee signed a ‘reservation’ that where a child’s religion had been ascertained and no home was available consultation should take place with representatives of the denomination concerned with a view to finding such a home.

Jim Richards went on to explore the practice of child migration. Mass overseas child migration began in the 1870s, with Canada the favoured destination. This continued until 1967 when the last group of children were sent to Australia by Barnardo’s.

Reflecting on the earliest Canadian departures Mr Richards told the event how a senior Catholic official, Cardinal Manning, was approached by poor law guardians in the early 1870s with a view to Catholic children who were placed with him emigrating to Canada. This was agreed and a group of children left for Canada every year, usually when aged between nine-years-old and their early teens.

The first Catholic children to leave the UK were from Liverpool, arranged by a priest called Father Nugent. Some concerns were expressed with foster parents of his or her religious persuasion was highly controversial and Mrs Murtagh kept this issue high on the agenda of the Committee’s work. When it came to publish its report the Committee recommended that where possible a child should be placed with foster parents of the same religion but that a child should not be kept in an unsuitable environment in circumstances where this was unavailable. Mrs Murtagh and five other members of the Committee signed a ‘reservation’ that where a child’s religion had been ascertained and no home was available consultation should take place with representatives of the denomination concerned with a view to finding such a home.
about the practice and the church arranged for an investigation into the matter, which was carried out in 1903. The Bans/Thomas report found that the circumstances in which children were being emigrated were satisfactory and that the majority of children were living successful lives on reaching the age of 18. The study found that girls usually went into service and boys into farming – not dissimilar to the opportunities available to many less affluent young people in the UK at that time.

The report recommended that a single Catholic agency should be formed to oversee the practice. This paved the way for the launch of the Catholic Emigration Society in 1903, with a reception home established in Ottawa. The Society continued to send children to Canada for 31 more years, ending the practice in 1934.

Explaining the rationale behind the ‘export’ of young people, Jim Richards said that from the outset child migration was viewed as a means of solving a number of problems, including the need for workers in various parts of the British Empire, the lack of opportunity for deprived children in the UK, and the fact that transferring the cost of caring for children to other countries was financially beneficial.

**Australia**

The practice of sending children to Canada did not cease because of any principled objection on the part of the Catholic Church but, Richards explained, because of a concern that Protestant church societies were sending increasing numbers of children to Australia after 1912. As such, in 1938 it was decided that Catholic children’s agencies would also start sending children to Australia.

By this time, according to a report by the Parliamentary Select Committee for Health into the Welfare of Former Child Migrants, following an enquiry in 1998, an estimated 100,000 children had been sent to Canada.

In his address to the SWHN event, Mr Richards drew attention to a number of positive stories told by children who had been sent to Canada but suggested that the general experience of children who had gone to Australia was not as favourable. Indeed he said that “some of the things [that people experienced] are absolutely inexcusable. I feel to some extent there wasn’t the oversight which was required.” He cited the words of the Curtis Committee – which considered a wide range of issues beyond the circumstances of Dennis O’Neill’s death – for how the need for child emigration was viewed by the 1940s. The report questioned whether child migration was really necessary but also recognised that, “a fresh start in a new country may, for children with an unfortunate background, be the foundation of a happy life, and the opportunity should therefore, in our view, remain open to suitable children who express a desire for it.”

A 1953 investigation by John Moss, a senior Home Office official, into conditions for children in Australia was broadly uncritical of the policy. A subsequent Home Office report, however, was more critical and Jim Richards pointed to the contrast between the larger and more isolated institutions provided by the Catholic Church and those established by Barnardo’s, which were smaller and in towns. In the discussion which followed his presentation, Jim Richards said that with the knowledge available in the 1950s, there should have been more questioning of the policy, especially of sending young people to isolated locations.

The event then heard from the Liverpool Charitable Voluntary Society’s (LCVS) Alan Lewis on the role of LCVS and the Liverpool Personal Social Services Society (LPSS). Mr Lewis explained that the ethos of both organisations, enabling people to help themselves, is broadly synonymous with that of social work.

The origins of LCVS and LPSS lie in a number of charitable initiatives designed to address the hardships faced by the poor and destitute in 19th century Liverpool. The work involved voluntary visitors who would go to the homes of the destitute. Although there was a growing interest in exploring why people became destitute it was also the case that a lot of charities saw themselves as being in competition with each other, so to maximise income they sought to have as many recipients on their books as possible.

At the turn of the century some people appreciated that the poor could not be helped just by the provision of money and goods. Instead attention shifted to better organising ‘the human environment’ and more effort was made for charitable workers to live alongside the poor. Accordingly the University Settlement – for men – and the Victoria Settlement – for women – were established in Liverpool, part of a wider move in British cities for shared centres offering services for the urban poor.

**Settlements**

There were close links between the settlements and academics in Liverpool, illustrated by the working relationship between Major Chaloner Downall and Frederick D’Aeth. They were instrumental in establishing the Liverpool Council for Voluntary Aid (LCVA) in 1909, which acted as a form of communication between charities and the Poor Law institutions. A lot of its work also involved developing juvenile groups, such as boys clubs.

The LCVA’s voluntary ‘visitors’ focused their efforts on personal issues that hindered the poor, with Frederick D’Aeth commencing work on establishing a committee that would supervise this aim. This personal work differed markedly from the Liverpool Central Relief Society which focussed on giving the sort of material aid that Frederick D’Aeth and others thought was limiting. Mr Lewis stressed that one of the aims of this approach was to end the distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. In 1919 the Personal Services Committee of the LCVA was hived off, with Dorothy Keeling becoming its first secretary and the Committee becoming the Liverpool Personal Services Society (LPSS) in 1922.

In addition to its regular work with families the LPSS was responsible for a number of other innovative initiatives. For example, in 1924 it started an after care scheme for hospital patients, and in 1927 it formed the first committee in the country specifically for the care of the elderly – a forerunner of Age Concern. Throughout the 1920s Dorothy Keeling campaigned against unscrupulous money lenders, leading to legislation in 1927.

In 1931 a scheme which placed people with a disability in employment with local firms was launched and in 1946 the voluntary ‘visitors’ focused their attention on providing a marriage guidance service, a full two years before the Marriage Guidance Council was formed. Alan Lewis suggested that Dorothy Keeling had steered LPSS towards becoming a wide-ranging general advice agency. With this in mind, it should come as little surprise that Dorothy Keeling moved to London in 1940 to develop the Citizens Advice Bureau.

In the discussion that followed, Mr Lewis suggested that throughout its history LPSS had stuck with a core principle that as need changed for any service user group it would provide appropriate new services. This contrasted with, for example, the Catholic Children’s Society and local authorities which were often slow to respond to change.

In the 1960s and 1970s LPSS continued to change and innovate, pioneering the attachment of social workers to GP surgeries. In 1978 a foster care scheme for older adults was extended to people with learning disabilities, mental health difficulties and people with dementia.

**Thanks to Mike Burt for recording the contributions of the speakers. The Social Work History Network meeting referred to took place at the University of Chester in March, where the Network also launched its new website, which can be accessed via http://swhn.chester.ac.uk**