

## **Welcare: Service of Thanksgiving celebrating 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary**

**Southwark Cathedral 15<sup>th</sup> November 2014**

***“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”***

The words of Jesus from St Mark’s Gospel are very radical, because they challenge all our preconceptions about mature adulthood and open the possibility that a child can better understand faith and what it means than those with the experience of years. Jesus is placing the focus on children and suggesting the not so young should look to the young and learn from their openness to God and his kingdom of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

We are here today to celebrate 120 years of the work of Welcare, serving communities in South London, Bromley and East Surrey, a Christian organisation dedicated to bringing support to those children and families where the joys of childhood and young adulthood are often constrained by poverty and disadvantage. In 2014, with a focus on understanding the pressures associated with family life, Welcare, with limited financial resources though richly blessed in human resources, offers support that seeks to strengthen families in ways that are seeking wholeness, dignity and life enhancement. This has been brought to life for us this morning by the very moving presentation of Welcare’s history and I congratulate Anna Khan, Chief Executive of Southwark Diocesan Welcare for her leadership and for coordinating our celebrations today.

In 1894 when Welcare was founded the world was a harsher place and poverty was endemic in many communities. The problems faced by many young women were about survival in a society where their very place was circumscribed by their gender and where pregnancy and single motherhood combined with poverty pushed them to the margins of society.

The particular needs of children and young women in the context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was recognised by visionary and compassionate Christians and in South London. Under the leadership of Bishop Randall

Davidson, the Bishop of Rochester, who went to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and his wife Edith, the 'Diocesan Association for the Care of Friendless Girls', subsequently changing its name to Welcare, was launched in 1894, 11 years before the creation of the Diocese of Southwark. In 1894 Rochester Diocese stretched over South East London and for a time included the Parish of St Saviour's Southwark and what was to be designated the new cathedral church in which we are gathering today. Indeed the energy and vision of Bishop Randall Davidson amplified the voices of those calling for a new diocese with a significantly urban focus and his successor Edward Talbot, the 100<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Rochester, became the first Bishop of Southwark, so it is good that both his successors, in each Diocese, are here today and I welcome Bishop James of Rochester warmly.

The first Director of Welcare, Miss Frances Hogg, described travelling to Woolwich, Chatham, Greenwich and the area surrounding Elephant & Castle in a 'lurching horse tram or the reluctant South Eastern Railway' and required mission workers (who later became known as outdoor workers) to be out on the streets late at night to befriend the street workers.

The Police had to protect these pioneer social workers and on one occasion helped evacuate a Welcare worker from her flat near Elephant & Castle as she was being pursued by those involved with trafficking white slaves. In the early 1900s a Welcare worker, Miss MacDougall, was recognised for her work in partnership with the Police in Lambeth and was appointed the first Lady Assistant to the Metropolitan Police, in which capacity she was responsible for taking statements from criminally-assaulted children and female witnesses in cases of sexual crime.

Conditions were clearly very hard for those who offered care to vulnerable children, working and ministering in a culture where young women in distress were often ostracised by their families. Living in poverty was difficult enough especially for those seeking to feed their children and the difficulties were only compounded by those quick to judge and condemn their fellow human beings deemed as having 'loose morals'.

In its inception the work was radical because it was focused on the weakest members of society and reflected the call of God in our first reading from

Deuteronomy to 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land'. The command of God to his people in Israel is a constant reminder that the call to follow him demands that we reach out to the outcast in our society, just as those early social worker pioneers reached out to their needy neighbours.

The poverty of yesterday is the austerity of today. If we consider the differences in expectations of families and children we realise that society still needs to be reminded of the responsibility of parenting in a loving and caring environment where the wider community plays its part in supportive ways.

In our very wealthy country it is easy to lose sight of children who are at risk and vulnerable. The call that was heard 120 years ago needs to be heard today where the pressures on families though different in many respects to those of 1894 are just as real for the children and their parents concerned who are often seeking better for their children than they have experienced themselves and want desperately to express love for their children and to be helped to know what this looks like. The Gospel challenges us not only to follow Christ in loving others as he loves us, but to meet people in the condition of their need and to know that they have much to teach us. Indeed there is an exchange taking place. For when we are open to the love of God we are always receiving more than we can ever hope to give.

It is vital that Welcare continues to respond to the needs of our children today, informed by wisdom borne by experience on the streets of South London and passionate commitment to strengthening families by keeping the focus on a whole series of interventions and small changes for the better that can rather amazingly cross the threshold of transformation.

In identifying new ways of working the service offered reflects the changing face of professional social work, with high quality trained professional staff meeting national standards of care, but massively supported by voluntary endeavour that has underpinned the foundation of the work with care and love and zeal for the Gospel.

In 1894 the Davidsons made a commitment of service characterised by love in Christ, practical support and charitable endeavour without which many more would have been condemned to lives that we cannot even begin to imagine.

Over 120 years the organisation we now call Welcare has ensured that services to children, young people and needy families have been the very essence of its being and purpose.

In the Gospel Jesus remonstrates with the disciples for keeping children from coming to him. The message of today's Service of Thanksgiving and celebration is that we should be instruments of his love, the love he extended so readily. The call to discipleship and service in the name of Jesus takes many forms. In the work of Welcare we have one that says to the world at large that we can work together using the opportunities God gives us to 'hope confidently, do valiantly and wait patiently'. Charity is a gift of God because it is an exchange of love and it is in giving that we will receive. So let us give special thanks for Randall and Edith Davidson who saw a need and made their faithful, loving response. Let us give thanks for all who have followed over 120 years and commit ourselves to play our part, thankful that we are all called into active service, through the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.