

Church and Society Conference 2011

Supporting the Next Generation: Education and Early Intervention

On Saturday 17 September Presbytery and Congregation C&S representatives joined Presbytery Local Education representatives and members of the Church and Society Council for a day at Carronvale House, Larbert. The focus was on young people.

The Council Convener, the Rev Ian Galloway, gathered us in song and introduced the first speaker, **Tam Baillie**, Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People ([SCCYP](#)). His role is to ensure Scotland's compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (child defined as up to age 18).

He listed three **strategic aims**:

1. Participation. How well do we listen? An exercise entitled "[A Right Blether](#)" had asked thousands of children and young people aged 5-18 what is good in their lives. There was an encouraging response, in the form of cards, pictures, poems, songs, celebrating good things and appreciating the opportunity to be heard. "[A Right Wee Blether](#)" is now involving small children (2-5) who are not to be overlooked! Early engagement is invaluable.

2. Awareness. How much is known about the existence and work of the [UNCRC](#)? Everyone is outraged when a child dies at the hands of a parent, but equally children who "turn to bad" are demonised. Often a cycle of neglect/abuse/violence is being repeated. Children want to feel safe and respected, and often feel they are neither.

3. Promotion and safeguarding of children's rights. Tam quoted some scary statistics of children living with drug or alcohol abuse and domestic violence, but also highlighted the number who were actually carers within their family situation, or were themselves disabled. Their plea too was to feel safe and secure at home, and included in activities and community life. Many factors tend to exclude disabled children, looked-after children, children of prisoners, children who have been trafficked.

The extent of trafficking is very difficult to quantify, but official figures are certainly underestimates. Trafficked children may be invisible in the system, signs are easy to miss and many will simply vanish under the official radar.

The churches have shown they can respond to the situation of asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups, there may now be opportunity to raise awareness of the trafficking issue.

Most important factors to consider:

- The current **cutbacks** are already having an effect.
- **Child poverty** blights life chances. New research is looking, not at the obvious fact that many do not thrive, but at why many *do* do well, in spite of everything.
- Importance of the **early years** of life, and of **early intervention** in potentially dangerous situations at any stage.

Consultation is imminent about a Bill to ensure the Rights of Children and Young People, commendable initiative from Scottish Government.

Vision for Early Years

1. Midwives and Health Visitors are vital, but period of visits has been shortened, to target high risk and emergency cases. Universal longer provision would remove stigma and actually be more likely to catch those who might fall through the net.

2. Development of Children's Centres. Sure Start-type provision could have helped. Our Childcare Partnerships were never properly evaluated.

3. Parent Programmes. Long-term support for parents pays off, but we do not put in sufficient resources (only 50% of typical European spending and 25% of Scandinavian) Churches can help. Playgroup movement was a great support, other ways now. Early Years support is like vaccination, provides protection for the future.

Questions and comments included

Success of programme encouraging fathers in prison to record bedtime stories for children, remain involved and connected.

Playgroups – fewer volunteers now available.

Childcare costs are too high, and are a disincentive to work, while workers are among lowest paid, message is that they are not valued.

Ian thanked Tam and invited all to use a short break to peruse resource materials provided by C&S Council.

Detective-Inspector Linda Borland of Strathclyde Police then addressed the subject of [Violence Reduction](#), not an easy one. Violence is persistent and deep-rooted in some communities and is highly resistant to change.

She showed a short series of photographs, taken in the East End of Glasgow, Glasgow Royal Infirmary and Polmont Young Offenders' Institution, accompanied by music by some lads from Polmont YOI. This graphic and disturbing film also expressed the hopes and aspirations of these young men.

Overall crime figures are down, but that is much to do with recording methods, and some crimes, especially drug related, are increasing. Not all crime is reported to police at all – over a period police dealt with x stabbing incidents, but the Infirmary's figures of victims treated were 70% higher. Also, many such crimes are committed by family, behind closed doors – how to police?

Perpetrators are often victims themselves. We lock up huge numbers of individuals, but it has been said that violence is actually a disease - violent communities present a public health problem, and should be treated accordingly. We need to identify the infection, treat it and inoculate others.

Attitudes need to change, this may take years – compare drink-driving.

After a welcome break for lunch and a breath of air (yes, a fine sunny day!) participants attended workshops.

Child Trafficking

In this workshop Stefan Stoyanov from [SCCYP](#) and his colleague defined trafficking and invited us to consider how it might be recognised and addressed. Signs that could be picked up include having unexplained money and goods; no money but a mobile phone; disappearing for a time; living with other unrelated children at one address; signs of maturity, especially sexual, beyond years – and many more (see below). Concerns should be reported to Social Services, Police, Crimestoppers. There are numbers for children to call, and it may be appropriate to contact the Refugee Council.

We were given [copies of the report of a study by the University of the Highlands & Islands](#) and were asked to prioritise some of its recommendations and draft a letter to a local authority and to an MSP/MP urging action.

Possible indicators that a child may have been trafficked:

Whilst resident in the UK the child:

- does not appear to have money but does have a mobile phone;
- receives unexplained/unidentified phone calls whilst in placement/temporary accommodation;
- possesses money and goods not accounted for;
- exhibits self assurance, maturity and self-confidence not expected to be seen in a child of such age;
- has a prepared story very similar to what other children have given;
- shows signs of physical or sexual abuse, and/or has contracted a sexually transmitted infection or has an unplanned pregnancy;
- has a history with missing links and unexplained moves;
- has gone missing from local authority care;
- is required to earn a minimum amount of money every day;
- works in various locations;
- has limited freedom of movement;
- appears to be missing for periods;
- is known to beg for money;
- performs excessive housework chores and rarely leaves the residence;
- is malnourished;
- is being cared for by adult/s who are not their parents and the quality of the relationship between the child and their adult carers is not good;
- is one among a number of unrelated children found at one address;
- has not been registered with or attended a GP practice;
- has not been enrolled in school;
- has a pattern of registration and de-registration from school;
- has to pay off an exorbitant debt, e.g. for travel costs, before having control over own earnings;
- is permanently deprived of a large part of their earnings by another person; and/or
- is excessively afraid of being deported.

More information:

<http://www.sccyp.org.uk/publications/youngpeople/childtrafficking>

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/crimes/humantraffick/childtrafficking>

Violence Reduction

Linda Borland returned to this subject with a very powerful presentation telling the story of “David”, a young man who seemed to be “born to fail”. Violence was endemic in his family and community, and many points at which an intervention might have made a difference were missed as he grew up. No-one in his family had a job, most were involved in drug and alcohol abuse, and violence was a way of life. Imprisoned for stabbing a man to death, David was released back to the same situation he had come from, and the downward spiral continued. There is probably no escape now for David, but there is hope for his child.

In a **question and comment** session, points included:

- [Prison chaplaincy](#) is a vital part of the Church’s work.
- [Prisoners’ Week commended](#). (this website will be updated and relaunched with this year’s Prisoners’ Week material early in October)
- One of the current Guild Projects is to support the [Visitor Centre at Perth Prison](#).
- There are befriending schemes, but provision is patchy.
- Linda readily admitted that the extent of the Church’s work and involvement had been a revelation to her and her colleagues, and she felt more could be done in partnership.

More information:

Detective Inspector Linda Borland’s [Violence Reduction Presentation](#)

Find [resources about supporting families affected by prison](#)

Guide to volunteering: [What Can I Do?](#)

Serve Your School

Rev Sandy Fraser, convener of the Church of Scotland Education Committee gave a presentation on the new Scripture Union initiative 'Serve Your School'.

[Click here to read the presentation](#)

Suicide among young men: the Church as a community of carers

Read [Dr. Macdonald's Presentation](#)

Suicide is a major cause of death among young men in Scotland. A young death is always one of the most devastating events for a family, and when that death results from suicide, the tragedy is all the harder to bear. Those with mental health issues are more likely to attempt or complete suicide; other 'at risk' groups include those leaving care and people involved in substance abuse.

Doing all that is possible to prevent the tragedy of death by suicide is an important aspect of the work of the church, concerned as we are to share new life and new hope on our journey through life. For us, as Christians, it is our faith, as well as our care and compassion, which calls us to 'be there' for, and to help and support those who are contemplating taking their own life.

It is possible to undertake training to become more able at supporting others who feel desperate or suicidal: among the organisations recommended is Scotland's Mental Health First Aid (www.smhfa.com). Rev Christine Murdoch spoke highly of this initiative, and recommended that churches avail themselves of local courses which are run free from time to time. Please see website for details.

The church often becomes involved after a suicide and it is just as important to look at how the church, in its parishes and communities, deals with suicide and with those bereaved by suicide. Bereavement by suicide does not necessarily take longer to heal than any other bereavement. However, there can be some questions in the aftermath of a suicide which make coping with that particular bereavement difficult: *Why did this happen? Why could we not stop it?* Grief may be mingled with feelings of anger, guilt confusion and shame. Added to these emotional stressors are the involvement of police, the need for a post mortem and the involvement of the Procurator Fiscals Office.

Any suicide, but particularly that of a young person, has a profound effect on the community to which the church seeks to minister. To our shame, the church in Scotland, at both a local and institutional level, has not always dealt with suicide with sufficient compassion. The booklet accompanying the Assembly report is aimed at Kirk Sessions, and is highly recommended.

More Information:

Church and Society report to the General Assembly 2011: [Suicide among young men: the church as a community of carers](#)

Short booklet: [Suicide handbook](#)

Church and Society report to the General Assembly 2011: [Mental Health](#)

[Mental Health Discussion Starters](#)

Cutting Edge Theatre Productions: provide a one hour play and workshop on the topic of suicide which includes a Teacher's Pack.

Could your Church/Presbytery sponsor this in your local school or college? Find out more: [Dare2Hope](#)

Summing up, Ian Galloway reminded us that all the people we had been hearing about live in a parish – where is the Church in such stories?

He quoted the Great Commission; the assurance that if we attend to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner, we are doing it for Jesus; and the proclamation of good news to the poor – and reminded us that these are not alternatives.

We have work to do; the image of the Church in decline belies what is actually happening in many situations.

The day ended as it began, in song, before we blessed each other at parting.

Thanks to those who wrote this summary: Mrs. Norah Summers; Dr. Murdo Macdonald