



The History of St Michael's Fellowship
From the Rescue of Fallen Women to the Support of Vulnerable Families

By Alison Penn Published by St Michael's Fellowship 29 Sept 2005 (St Michael's Day)
160 pp plus 8pp b/w photos ISBN 0-9551132-0-28 £10

When St Michael's Fellowship was founded by Agnes Parr in 1903 in London its main purpose was to provide refuge and moral guidance to unmarried pregnant girls from professional and upper class families. The Fellowship's maternity homes, rescue homes and nursery were discreetly advertised in the Church Times. The first homes were in Pimlico, but soon there were other houses in Barnes and Balham, including a "preventive home" for young girls.

Much of this history is the story of the hardship for women having children outside society's norms. In the early years there was much emphasis on the rescue and redemption of "fallen women". As the century progressed, the influence of religion weakened, and modern social work practice took over. And as the stigma attached to illegitimacy declined, those daughters of vicars and lawyers, who hid away in shame in the Fellowship's houses, were succeeded by vulnerable families from disadvantaged backgrounds facing quite different challenges. Today St Michael's, still operating in south London, is in the forefront of work that supports these families, with particular emphasis on the welfare of children.

The Fellowship's archives have provided insights into class, money, medicine, psychiatry, religion and moral attitudes, as well as many fascinating stories. For example:

From the Patients' Case Book, 1903-1906. . .

Sarah May, 19... from Miss Bardsley Refuge, Parkhurst Road. Left Jan, 1905. Returned March 1905. Left Jan 1906. A terrible case of restlessness is still giving anxiety May 1906. Has fallen since leaving Home.

From a conference report, 1912. . .

They attributed the sad state of things to three causes: 1. The relaxation of discipline in home life. 2. The tone prevalent in present day plays. 3. Pernicious literature.

From the Fellowship minutes, 1932. . .

As the full fees of 30 shillings a week had never been paid for any girl. . . it was agreed to reduce them to 25 shillings in the hope that this might sometimes be paid.

This history of St Michael's Fellowship, while charting the story of one voluntary organisation, also throws light on some of the biggest social changes of the 20th century – particularly ideas about the family, pregnancy, motherhood, illegitimacy and adoption. The book will be appreciated by anyone interested in these changes, especially in women's studies.

To order please contact St Michael's Fellowship, 1F Gleneagle Road, London SW16 6AX. Tel 020 8677 6888
maureen.archangel@zetnet.co.uk www.stmichaelsfellowship.org.uk

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