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## **Christian Care for the Elderly: St. Mungo's Old Folks' Centre for Wellbeing**

**By Stephen J. McKinney**

Not far from the historic and iconic St. Mungo's Cathedral in Glasgow there is a day Centre for the elderly that encapsulates the Christian vision of love and care of neighbor, the *St. Mungo's Old Folks Centre for Wellbeing*. This short article provides an overview of the history of the Centre and discusses some of the unique characteristics of the Christian rationale for the work and outreach of the Centre.

The Centre initially opened on Monday 7<sup>th</sup> October 1963 as St Mungo's Old Folk's Club. The idea for the Club originated with the then rector of St Mungo's parish in Townhead in Glasgow. Fr. John Mary Griffin, a Passionist priest, was concerned about the problems of loneliness and boredom among the elderly in the parish. He was inspired by a Television programme about Lamb's House in Leith. This was a 16<sup>th</sup> century town house in Leith that was owned by the National Trust and was used as a day Centre for the elderly at that time. Fr. John Mary formed an Executive Committee to oversee the affairs of the St Mungo's Club and the membership of the Executive represented a mix of influential Catholic groups and groups from Glasgow City, including: St Vincent De Paul; Union of Catholic Mothers; Glasgow Corporation Health and Welfare Department, the Woman's Royal Voluntary Welfare Service and the Glasgow Old People's Welfare Committee. Glasgow Corporation provided generous financial aid to help support the Club. The Parochial Halls of St Mungo's parish were used to house the Club and adapted where necessary. Nobody could have anticipated the early success of the Club. On the first day of opening, 70 men and 114 ladies enrolled and by the end of the year the membership was 806 in total (290 men and 516 Ladies). In the early period of the opening of the Club, the membership drew from the local area of Townhead, but gradually the Club attracted people from all over the city. This included people from the new housing estates in Glasgow that had been created to rehouse residents from the overcrowded areas of the city that had been demolished as part of the post World War II redevelopment and regeneration of the city. This was the first Club of its type in the West of Scotland and attracted great interest from other parts of the country and other parts of the world.

The Club provided a three-course lunch and tea breaks during the day. There was a small fee charged for the meals and teas to help cover the costs. In 1965 a new wing to the Parochial Halls was opened and the Club was able to provide a variety of services that were invaluable to the elderly at that time: baths; laundry; chiropody and hairdressing (these were partially funded by voluntary contributions from the elderly). As the Club developed into the 1970s, the Club also provided a variety of activities to engage the elderly: exercise classes; dance classes; Arts and Crafts; drama group and the more sedentary board games. Professor Anderson, a pioneer in geriatric care and the first Chairman of the Executive committee, stated in the 1966 annual report of the Club, that ill-health, both of mind and body in the elderly often stems from loneliness, boredom and frustration. He perceived the Club as an important part of the solution to counteracting the dangers of old people experiencing empty lives and lacking purpose.

In March 2008, the St Mungo's Old Folks' Club was renamed as the *St. Mungo's Old Folks Centre for Wellbeing*. The work of the Centre is arguably more important than ever. The Scottish Government has recognised that people in Scotland are living longer and many are retaining their health into old age. The Government has positioned its policy on older people within its social justice agenda. The Centre contributes to this social justice agenda and continues to address the issue of social isolation, aiming to help improve health and wellbeing and improve the quality of life for the elderly. As the population ages, social isolation is increasingly understood as a serious threat, not just in terms of an increase in depression and poor mental health but also in terms of physical health and mobility - echoing the words of Professor Anderson from 1966. The Centre is currently open five days a week and provides an opportunity for people over 60 to meet and eat together. The Centre continues to provide support in many other ways: daily activities; outings and assistance with social welfare. The greatest contribution of the Centre remains the fact that it is a place where elderly people can meet and remain active in body and mind and retain their dignity.

One of the defining features of the club is that the original proposal for the club was founded on Christian principles. The 1966 report used some short extracts from the newly published *Vatican Council Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (1965) to articulate these Christian principles. One of the key extracts was: 'wherever there are people in need of food and drink, clothing, housing, medicine, employment, education; wherever men lack the facilities necessary for living a truly human life...there Christian charity should seek them out...and help them with appropriate relief' (section 8). There was another dimension of the original Christian vision of the Club that was equally important. The original proposal outlined quite clearly the inclusive nature vision of the role of the Club in the local area: 'The Club will be undenominational. All Old Age Pensioners living in the District will be eligible for membership'. This later became amended in the constitution to incorporate a broader inclusion: 'The Club is to provide for... old persons of pensionable age without distinction of race, nationality or religion'. The ecumenical dimension was consolidated with the establishment of a monthly ecumenical service in the halls in 1963. The services were conducted in collaboration with the minister of Glasgow Cathedral. This was the era of the very early stages of the (Roman) Catholic engagement and participation in the ecumenical movement in Scotland. The vision of the Club was innovative and contributed to this new Christian fellowship and solidarity. The monthly ecumenical service has continued to the present day.

The Centre has provided an invaluable service to the elderly from its inception to the present day. It has also earned a place in local and national history. Firstly, it was one of the very early day-centres for the elderly that provided a range of services. It provided an important service to the people of Townhead and it also provided a meeting point for people who had been relocated to the newer parts of the city. Secondly, it was founded on Christian principles and provides an example of inclusive Christian social mission and outreach. The aims and operation of the Centre are coherent with both the social justice agenda of the Scottish Government and also coherent with the social justice agenda of the Catholic Church.

Selected references (a full list available on request):

Griffin, J.M. (1962) *Proposal for St. Mungo's Old Folks' Club*. St. Mungo's Parish Records.

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