HISTORICAL ADOPTION PRACTICES:

RESEARCH INTO CHURCH OF ENGLAND AFFILIATED MOTHER AND BABY HOMES 1949–1976

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Contents

A note on language

Some of the archive material referred to in this report contains discriminatory language which is not in current usage and which readers may find offensive or upsetting. The inclusion of such language is for the accuracy of the historic record and does not reflect the views of Lambeth Palace Library, the National Church Institutions, or the staff working on the documents.

Preface

In undertaking this research, we have been deeply conscious that every record we examine represents experiences that were often profound, painful and complex. Adoption within mother and baby homes was not simply a policy or a practice; it was something lived, felt and carried by the women, children and families involved. We approached our records and this research with the understanding that it reflects real people whose experiences matter, and whose stories deserve care, dignity and acknowledgement.

As you read this work, we ask for your understanding if at times our analysis may appear brief or include necessary generalisations. This research was undertaken with respect for the people described in our archive material, and we endeavoured not to lose sight of the emotional significance of adoption. Any concision is not intended to diminish the weight of these experiences, but to navigate them responsibly while producing something of use. Our hope is that this work contributes to a fuller understanding of what took place during those years.

Executive summary

This report is the result of research undertaken during the first half of 2025 to learn more about the Church of England's past provision of mother and baby homes for unmarried women. It examines the period between 1949 and 1976, during which an estimated 185,000 children born in England and Wales to unmarried mothers were put up for adoption. Across society, incidences have been reported of what has been described as 'forced adoptions', where unmarried mothers have expressed feeling unsupported in making decisions about whether to keep their baby, or in some cases have described being separated from them against their will.

The report is offered with a deep sense of sorrow for the reports of harsh treatment of mothers during this period, and with hope that it will be of service to the women and children whose lives were affected by what happened to them in mother and baby homes.

By looking primarily at archival material – largely records of meetings and associated guidance – from the Church of England's Moral Welfare Council (MWC), and its successor body, the Board for Social Responsibility (BSR) – this report explores the Church of England's guidance, attitudes and practices across almost three decades, often reflecting attitudes prevalent at the time, which are not consistent with current standards. During this period, unmarried mothers – some in their early teens, and often sent to homes far away from their families – and the newborn babies to whom they gave birth, faced a social context characterised by shame, stigma and hostility towards them. Research literature, including personal testimonies, suggests that putting a baby up for adoption in such circumstances often took place due to a combination of factors: a mother's realisation that they would be unable to provide for their child; the lack of acceptance and the threat of withdrawal of personal and financial support from her own family, and, typically, the absence of the baby's father; the limited options available and presented to mothers at the time as they made decisions; and pressure put on them by people who were responsible for their welfare; and social systems and structures which made it extremely difficult for unmarried women with children to live independently.

The Church of England was involved in the provision of mother and baby homes throughout the period examined. Some homes were the direct responsibility of the relevant diocese, whilst others were run by semi-autonomous committees over which dioceses had varying degrees of involvement or influence. These homes were part of the wider social infrastructure of the time, engaging – and coordinating efforts – with social services. The MWC and BSR appear to have played a convening role and acted as the central authority for diocesan councils, settling questions raised by staff about pay in individual homes, advising on the legality of medical questions, and seeking to influence the government on legislation related to adoption. Moreover, senior members of these councils visited homes and appear to have overseen training programmes for workers. These workers – almost exclusively women – were recruited and employed across the country to perform the role of 'family case workers', worked closely with relevant agencies, and were instrumental in arranging adoptions.

The practical and pastoral guidance issued by the MWC during this period was rooted in a desire to keep mothers and their babies together. In many cases, this is what happened. However, source material and personal testimonies suggest that this aspiration was not always upheld, and in some cases was disregarded. By 1954, the MWC's policy was to seek to keep mothers and babies together when possible, but that it should not be regarded as a failure if adoption was agreed to be what it described as the 'best solution'. Guidance for chaplains ministering in mother and baby homes similarly emphasised that the mother had a right to her child and that the child, too, had a right to their mother. Any adoption therefore would need to be consensual – as set out in the Adoption Act 1949 – and not the result of undue pressure. Yet this sat alongside language which expressed dehumanising and dismissive attitudes, falling short of what would be expected towards anyone in the church's care, not least people who were rendered especially vulnerable by their circumstances.

In the adoption process itself, children were sometimes described in commodified terms, with the BSR and diocesan adoption societies citing

the need for a central 'clearing house' where supply and demand could meet. Alongside that, there was a reforming and 'corrective' nature to a number of the homes. Evidence reviewed indicates that the MWC and BSR were aware of the significant pressure on staff, who were often overworked, poorly paid, and under-resourced to support the mothers and babies in their care. Recurring themes include staff burnout, lack of funds, homes relying on donations of food and equipment, and inadequate living conditions. By 1968, the BSR had inspected its mother and baby homes, rating some as substandard. There have been some high-profile incidences reported in the media of mistreatment of mothers and, in some cases, deaths of infants.

The nature of the surviving records held at Lambeth Palace Library means that this report offers a mixed, partial, yet illuminating picture of the Church of England's involvement in historical adoption practices. The diffuse nature of the Church of England's structures, including through the administration of this work, mean this research is qualitative and indicative, designed to paint a picture of the period under review, and learn more about the scale of the Church of England's involvement.

Methodology

Research into the Church of England's provision of mother and baby homes was undertaken over the course of six months in 2025. It explores the kind of records relating to mother and baby homes still held at Lambeth Palace Library and the records of the Moral Welfare Council and Board for Social Responsibility.

The task was to identify any records addressing how the Church of England approached its work with mother and baby homes at a national level, and to find out whether relevant records survive which help to broaden our understanding.

This work provides a partial picture of what took place in mother and baby homes affiliated with the Church of England, drawing primarily on the available archival material still held centrally at Lambeth Palace Library.

Origins

Historically, what came to be understood as mother and baby homes had their origins in the 'Magdalen Hospitals', established in mid-eighteenth century England and Ireland for pregnant unmarried women. These were founded by lay people with a religious and 'reforming' purpose, with the pattern of life in these homes characterised by domestic work, prayer and penitence, whilst women had to give up their babies and remain in the homes for several years. The oldest 'Magdalen' home in Ireland (Denny House in Dublin) was a Protestant foundation, and eventually came into the remit of the Anglican Church of Ireland. It has been the subject of in–depth research by the Government of Ireland as one of the institutions investigated in the mother and baby home scandal in light of the discoveries at Tuam in County Galway.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Anglican Sisterhoods of the Church Penitentiary Association ran 'Houses of Mercy' and refuges for women who were pregnant without a husband – defining them as 'fallen women'.[1]

In the late nineteenth century, campaigners for 'moral purity', such as Josephine Butler, saw part of their work to rescue and train such women and worked with Anglican bishops to provide refuges in individual dioceses. In her study of the development of mother and baby homes, Jill Nicholson writes that 'reform' was the purpose of these residential institutions, with 'individual sin … the only explanation and admitted and personal penitence the only form of atonement'.[2]

There were more localised committees towards the end of the nineteenth century. The Ladies Association for the Care of Friendless Girls, founded under the auspices of the Church of England, provided residences for 'fallen and friendless girls' during their first pregnancy. These homes sought to find employment for women and arrange foster care for their babies.

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1 *A Guide to Church Penitentiaries and Refuges or Shelters for the Reformation of Fallen Women Penitents*, (London, Church Penitentiary Association, 1915).

2 Nicholson, Jill. *Mother and Baby Homes: A Survey of Homes for Unmarried Mothers* (London, 1968), pp.12–14.

Eventually, these homes and the old Anglican penitentiaries, refuges and other kinds of shelters were placed under the umbrella of the diocese in which they were founded, and some continued to operate under different guises until well into the second half of the twentieth century.[3] Some homes originated as diocesan foundations; others, which were founded by a separate group of religious lay people, gradually came into the orbit of the diocese and the Church of England. Annual reports from the homes showed that each had its own distinct history, tradition and governing committees.

This report refers to 'mother and baby homes' for simplicity, but archive material shows that this denotes a range of residences for mothers and babies which had various functions. The different types of accommodation and provision for unmarried mothers reflects their varied histories. Maternity homes had a maternity unit on site, where babies were born. Shelters provided emergency accommodation for mothers before and after birth. There were also a very small number of hostels, from which the mother could go out to work and where the baby was cared for, in order to keep mothers and children together.

A report in 1969 describes how some homes were the direct responsibility of the diocese, whilst some were run by 'semi-autonomous committees over which dioceses exert a varying amount of influence' and others 'remained autonomous but affiliated to the diocesan council'.[4]

3 www.childrenshomes.org.uk/LA/ Accessed April 2025

4 *Church of England Committee for Diocesan Moral and Social Welfare Councils: REPORT on Secretary's Survey of Diocesan Social work and Moral Welfare Agencies in England – January 1968 to June 1969* (London, 1969), p. 5.

Social context

Providers of mother and baby homes during this period were responding to a culture of shame, stigma and secrecy which surrounded unmarried mothers and their children. For many families, it was a source of moral disgrace and/or financial difficulty to discover that their unmarried daughter was pregnant. Women and girls entered these homes because, often, they had nowhere else to go, sent away by their families to give birth in secret, or because they were completely alone. Dr Michael Lambert, a prominent historian in this field, has reflected on the 'secrecy' which underpinned adoption practices, enabling some adoptive families to 'pass the child off biologically as their own' and mothers to 'return home and begin their lives again, untainted by the stigma of illegitimacy'.[5]

Patriarchal ideas about female sexual purity and family identity are clear in the language often used about unmarried mothers at the time – 'fallen', 'ruined' – and in the labelling of their children as 'bastards'. The shame of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried mothers was invariably borne by the woman involved, with the behaviour of men often ignored or excused, and there was little social expectation that fathers would have to address the consequences of their actions. Although it is estimated that approximately 185,000 children born to unmarried mothers in England and Wales during the period under review were put up for adoption, many 'illegitimate' children stayed with the mother's family and community; in some cases, their birth identity was hidden.

Lambert argues that 'the nascent welfare state was designed around male financial responsibility for their families' and that 'its failure to adequately provide financial support and housing to unmarried mothers was intentional'.[6] The legal right to housing for unmarried mothers was not guaranteed until 1977, and Bastardy Acts were not repealed until 1987, with the introduction

5 Michael Lambert, 'Scotland apologised in 2023 for historic forced adoptions – but this happened throughout the UK' in *The Conversation* (March 22, 2024) theconversation.com. Accessed March 2025

6 Michael Lambert, 'Scotland apologised in 2023 for historic forced adoptions – but this happened throughout the UK' in *The Conversation*.

of the Family Reform Act which gave the same legal rights to children born outside of marriage as to those born within marriage. With the relaxation of abortion laws in 1967, and the availability of the contraceptive pill to married women in 1961 and then to unmarried women in 1974, women had access to greater control of their fertility than before.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights inquiry into this issue includes written and oral testimonies from mothers and children who were directly affected.[7] The *Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* established by the Irish Government in 2015 provides valuable contextual research and a significant amount of comparative material.[8] There is a body of recent and current scholarship which has focused on single mothers, adoption, the welfare state and family history in the UK, including the work of Professor Pat Thane at King's College London and Professor Tanya Evans at Macquarie University, and the historian Jane Robinson.[9] Church run homes feature briefly in their studies.

Other relevant source material includes:

- *The Church in Social Work: A Study of Moral Welfare Work undertaken by the Church of England*, which provides analysis of the historic development of moral welfare work up until the mid-1960s.[10]

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7 *'The Violation of Family Life: Adoption of Children of Unmarried Women 1949–1976:* Report by the *House of Lords and House of Commons Committee Report, with recommendations to government.*' 15 July 2022. publications.parliament.uk. Accessed March 2025.

8 *Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes* (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, Published 12 January 2021, last updated on 22 November 2021). gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/). Accessed 12 March 2025.

9 Tanya Evans and Pat Thane, *Sinner? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in 20th Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and Jane Robinson, *In the Family Way Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* (London: Viking, 2015).

10 Penelope M. Hall and Ismene V. Howes, *The Church in Social Work: A Study of Moral Welfare Work undertaken by the Church of England* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1965).

- *Mother and Baby Homes: A Survey of Homes for Unmarried Mothers*, which looked in depth at the lived experience of residents (not restricted to Church of England homes).[11]
- Michael Lambert has focused much of his research on historical adoption practices and the government's involvement in the early years of the welfare state.[12]

11 Jill Nicholson, *Mother and Baby Homes: A Survey* (London: Allen & Unwin,1968).

12 His most accessible work is on the Adoption UK Podcast. *Adoption Today: Legacies of Forced Adoption and the Modern Impact with Dr. Michael Lambert* (Parts 1 and 2), 2024 Podcast, Adoption UK.

Structures

The Church of England Moral Welfare Council (MWC) was formed in 1938–1939, with the aim of acting as a central council of the Church for the 'co-ordination of thought and action in relation to the place of sex, marriage and the family in the Christian life'.[13] The MWC became the Board for Social Responsibility (BSR) in 1958. The residential settings for unmarried mothers, which were an integral part of the 'rescue work' undertaken by various dioceses in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, fell under the remit of the MWC upon its founding. Records and minutes from meetings demonstrate that the MWC had a focused and sustained interest in what it termed 'the problem of unmarried mothers', moral welfare homes, and adoption processes.[14] From the sample of records accessed, the MWC can be understood as having been the convening authority to which diocesan councils reported. It appears to have settled disputes over pay raised by staff in individual homes, advised on the ethics and legality of questions brought to its attention, and sought to influence government bodies on legislation regarding adoption. In addition to mother and baby homes, the MWC described itself as having general oversight of the work of a range of homes and bases with different functions, including children's homes and 'training homes' for young women to learn domestic skills.[15]

Diocesan moral welfare councils were established to ensure the coordination of the MWC's activities at a regional level. These diocesan councils tended to have branch associations, and the homes appear to have come under the remit of these branches. The employment of 'moral welfare workers', also described in

13 Central Institutions of the Church – Lambeth Palace Library (https://www.lambethpalacelibrary.info/collections/central-institutions-of-the-church/). Accessed 18 February 2026.

14 *Moral Crisis: The Church in Action: The Educational and Remedial Work of the Church of England Moral Welfare Council in Matters of Sex, Marriage and the Family* (London, Church Information Board for the Church of England Moral Welfare Council: 1950).

15 *Moral Crisis: The Church in Action: The Educational and Remedial Work of the Church of England Moral Welfare Council in Matters of Sex, Marriage and the Family* (London, Church Information Board for the Church of England Moral Welfare Council, 1950), p. 11

some records as 'outdoor workers', provided the initial link between the mother and baby homes and the mothers. They often worked with the homes directly and were instrumental in arranging adoptions, fostering arrangements, and negotiating other kinds of accommodation when the mother had kept her baby but could not return to her family home. These workers also supported mothers and their families to know what health and welfare services and support might be available to them. A report published in 1950, *Guide to Church of England Moral Welfare Work*, shows that there were 221 female outdoor workers employed by the Church of England, but only one 'male worker' assigned to work with men.[16] An article from 1991 in the *Church Times* on adoption records refers to chaotic filing systems and high levels of secrecy in order to protect the identities of the mother and putative father.[17]

The MWC had its own training and selection committee, directly appointing and providing instruction to staff who operated nationally. The MWC appears to have worked closely with the Josephine Butler Memorial House in Liverpool, which trained women as professional administrators in the field of social welfare.[18] A short booklet produced by the MWC in 1955 describes how the training was 'designed to give students an introduction to Christian Theology', with courses such as 'ethics, psychology … [and] practical training in family-

16 *Guide to Church of England Moral Welfare Work, Including Homes, Outdoor Workers and Diocesan Organising Secretaries 1950* (London: Church of England Moral Welfare Council, 1950).p. 21.

17 Kirsty Milne, 'A Search that lets children and parents find each other' in *Church Times*, 13 December 1991, p. 8.

18 'The Josephine Butler Memorial House, Liverpool, affiliated to the Anglican Archbishops' Advisory Board for Preventive and Rescue Work, was set up in 1920 in association with the University of Liverpool to train women as professional administrators in the field of social welfare, in accordance with the reforming principles of Josephine Butler's work …. Continuous financial struggles and the gradual evolution of professional social services made the House (later Josephine Butler College) unviable. The last students finished their courses in 1972.' *Special Collections & Archives: Josephine Butler Collection, University of Liverpool*, libguides.liverpool.ac.uk. Accessed 12 June 2025

casework and the welfare department of the local authority'.[19] These courses varied in length between one year and three years, depending on the age and experience of the trainee. Students tended to be older women and were poorly paid in their work, despite the considerable responsibilities they would assume as the connecting link between homes and mothers, social services and adoption agencies.[20] Many of the moral welfare workers were directly employed by local welfare associations and it is unclear how much oversight the MWC and dioceses had over them.

19 *Training for Social and Moral Welfare Work at Home and Overseas: The Josephine Butler Memorial House* (Church Information Board, Church of England Moral Welfare Council, 1955).

20 See 'The Recruitment and Training of Workers' pp. 102–123 in Hall and Howes, *The Church in Social Work*.

Culture and conditions

A selection of annual reports from mother and baby homes dated between 1960–1972 are located in the Lambeth Palace Library archives. Whilst they are not necessarily a representative sample, they offer a valuable window into the culture and conditions of these homes. Summaries of the work of the homes include the range of possible next steps for the mother after a birth: taking the baby home, marrying the father, placing the infant into a fostering arrangement, a state-run nursery or local authority care, or adoption. According to Nicholson, many of the homes were large old houses which were not originally intended for this level of multi-occupancy, with often shabby furnishings, old equipment, and little privacy.[21] This survey demonstrates that residents typically occupied large, shared bedrooms, often with inadequate sanitary provisions; none of the homes in this survey were purpose built. They tended to have a recreation or common room, a nursery for the newborn babies, kitchen and laundry provision, as well as accommodation for the staff who lived on site. The homes were often suburban houses, with nearby access to public transport and amenities. Various reports show that many women and girls were admitted to homes far away from their families, sometimes in completely different parts of the country, whilst one home had mothers from countries such as Norway, New Zealand, Singapore, Trinidad and Uganda.[22]

The staff generally would consist of a superintendent or matron, midwives, sometimes assisted by ancillary staff such as a nursery nurse and cook. Each home had its own form of governance; there was usually a committee, sometimes a separate 'Home Committee', a president or patron (including diocesan bishops), a treasurer, auditors and/or solicitors and medical advisers. Sources of funding can be traced to homes, which included per capita grants from the local authority, payments from the residents and/or their family, local church groups and wealthy members of the community. The fundraising activities within homes shed light on the priorities and preoccupations of homes, with coffee mornings and jumble sales a regular feature. Some record

21 Nicholson, *Mother and Baby Homes*, pp. 61–65.

22 Lambeth Palace Library, MV700.E6P59 [P]

the visit of local dignitaries. A number of personal testimonies note that expectant mothers were expected to undertake manual tasks whilst resident in homes. These poor conditions remain an important part of the collective memory of women within the homes.

Some of the records note:

- Funding pressures and dependence on charitable donations for food, clothes, bedding, prams and toys
- Logistical challenges caused by staffing constraints and over-occupancy levels in homes
- Faulty heating systems causing cold homes
- Challenges around supporting adolescent mothers
- Issues with competency among staff supporting mothers from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.
- Limited options in terms of suitable alternative accommodation for mothers who had not reconciled with their parents and were unable to return to their family home
- Teenage girls who had run away from home because of what had happened to them
- A range of activities for residents, including trips to the cinema and theatre.

Chaplaincy

Having been founded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the religious purpose of rehabilitation, many of the homes still retained chapels and a chaplain. The chaplain was often appointed directly by the diocesan bishop, with a specific remit to offer pastoral care to residents and staff, and to officiate at services within the home. In 1951, the MWC published *The Chaplain in Moral Welfare Homes*, which offers a sense of the role of the chaplain whilst illustrating some of the MWC's attitudes towards mothers and babies and adoption practices.[23] This document stresses the importance of the bond between a mother and child, and that adoption should not be the default option. However, the emphasis on encouraging mothers to 'make amends' and 'make good and try again' reveals the moral imperatives chaplains were encouraged to instil. The document describes how 'some [mothers] are strangers to truth and live in an unreal world of their own imagination … some are deeply hurt by betrayal, some are bewildered by the consequences of thoughtless experiment, some are hardened by the effects of promiscuity'. The document describes the Christian witness of chaplains as requiring 'much patience … with those who appear dull, stupid and shallow … few of the girls are capable of sustained thinking or of following an argument'. It notes the need for 'prayers in simple language [because] some of the loveliest collects are beyond the understanding of an average girl in a home'.

The guidance makes clear that the practice of religion in homes was an important part of the chaplain's ministry. It describes two 'pitfalls':

> One is a sense of 'compulsory' religious observance which is often challenged by those outside the work. The compulsion is often denied, though it is in fact only disguised when the choice lies between attending Evensong and remaining behind in a chilly common-room with the wireless turned off. Compulsion in the sense that it is easier to attend than not should be reduced to a minimum so that there is appetite for more. The other pitfall is to limit observance to attending the chapel in the Home, so that the girls

23 *The Chaplain in Moral Welfare Homes* (London: Church information Board for the Church of England Moral Welfare Council 1951).

> lack the sense of fellowship in the whole Christian family and remain unfamiliar with the feel of an ordinary parish Church. To avoid this, girls in some Homes are encouraged to go to Church in twos and threes like other people (instead of an escorted 'crocodile' formation) and to sit where they like.[24]

Whilst there is an attempt in the guidance to recognise the pressure that women and girls might feel to attend church services, it does not set out meaningful steps to mitigate this, and there is an assumption of separateness between residents in homes and existing members of the congregation.

There is a strong element of spiritual judgement in the guidance, with the chaplain encouraged 'never to forget that he is commissioned to exercise a ministry of reconciliation, but care must be taken… not to introduce the idea of a compulsory confession' through a desire 'to be rid of her burden of guilt'. The document notes that some 'will never respond along these lines' and that 'others have too little sense of failure'. Jane Robinson's study *In the Family Way: Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* included interviews with women who had been resident in Church of England mother and baby homes. Many remembered 'weekly visits … from a clergyman of some kind, who would urge them, after the delivery, to make things right with God and try to start afresh'.[25] One account notes that 'Marilyn's flesh creeps when she recalls the vicar who used to ask her, in urgent tones, whether she was thinking about God while her baby was being conceived'.[26]

The section on adoption sets out pastoral guidance expected of chaplains:

> *'Not only has the natural mother the right to her own child and a legal responsibility which she can only relinquish by legal proceedings, but the child*

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24 The Chaplain in Moral Welfare Homes (London: Church Information Board for the Church of England Moral Welfare Council, 1951).

25 Robinson, Jane. *In the Family Way: Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* (London: Viking 2015), p. 68.

26 Robinson, Jane. *In the Family Way: Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* (London: Viking 2015), p. 171–172.

has the right to his own mother. The material advantages of an adopted home do not necessarily outweigh the psychological and emotional disadvantages of separating a mother and child, especially when an adopted child reaches later adolescence and reflects upon the mystery of his own origin, and the absence of real family relationships.

In any event it is a mistaken kindness to promise or even encourage adoption before the baby is born. Not only may the child prove to be unsuitable for adoption, but the mother herself may change entirely in her attitude towards and feeling for her child when it is born.

If after all the other alternatives have been examined, it seems advisable for the child to be adopted, it must be by the real consent of the mother, and must not be the result of undue pressure brought to bear upon her, whether it be pressure of events or of friends and relatives.

The Chaplain can do much to strengthen the natural bond between the mother and her child by encouraging in her an attitude of loving responsibility. In countless practical ways the whole work of the Home is designed for the same end.'

Changing attitudes

In July 1950, the MWC received a letter from Dr John Bowlby, a renowned and influential child psychiatrist, asking for its current policy 'on the problem of illegitimacy'.[27] Bowlby was particularly interested to know whether the MWC expected most of the unmarried mothers to keep their children or whether adoptions would be arranged. The response from the MWC made it clear that its policy at the time was 'to explore every avenue to make it possible for the unmarried mother to look after her own child and that adoption is only arranged with the girl's full consent after other possibilities are ruled out'. Bowlby expressed concern about this, expressing his view that 'illegitimate children are far better off in adopted homes than being sent from pillar to post, which so often happens'. The MWC clarified in a further response to Bowlby that 'the unmarried mother after the birth of her baby usually wants to keep her baby … we are not prepared to advise a mother to break this relationship until she has explored all other possibilities. If she decides that the baby must be adopted then we help her to make the best possible arrangements for the adoption'. The correspondence with Bowlby demonstrates that the MWC believed that diocesan welfare councils were providing a service which gave unmarried mothers informed choice and respected the bond between mother and child.

However, the minutes of the MWC meeting from November 1953 show that the MWC's adoption policy subsequently came under review. The Secretary of the MWC set out the changing context over the preceding decade: housing difficulties for unmarried mothers with children; the virtual disappearance of foster mothers during the war years; the growing number of people coming forward as would-be adopters. The Secretary asked the council: '1) do we accept adoption today as one positive way in which we help the unmarried mother to plan for her illegitimate child? OR; 2) do we regard adoption as a regrettable expedient because of circumstances over which we have no control? We must remind ourselves that the final decision must be made by the mother and only by her, and it is not for us to over-persuade her either to keep him or part with him.'[28]

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27 Secretary and Deputy Secretary of the MWC. Lambeth Palace Library, MWC/T/ILL/2. The letter is dated 18th July, 1950.

28 Lambeth Palace Library, MWC/Min/M/2, f.175.

The MWC concluded in March 1954 that 'although it is our policy to encourage the mother to keep her child wherever it is possible, when it is agreed that adoption is the best solution it should not be regarded as failure but as a normal part of moral welfare work'.[29]

Moral welfare workers were facilitating an increasing number of adoptions after this period, in response to pressures such as the shortage of foster mothers, a lack of housing, as well as a growing number of families that wished to adopt. BSR correspondence from October 1965 refers to children and adoption as a commodity: 'At the conference of diocesan and deanery Adoption Societies … we all agreed on the need for some sort of central "clearing house" where supply and demand could meet. Particularly important is the need to help with the demand for families for handicapped and, to an increasing degree, for coloured children'.[30]

Documents from 1970 offer an insight into the BSR's attitudes at the time. The homes are described as places 'from which the adoption agencies get their raw material'. Some mothers were described as 'dim, feckless, [and] inadequate'. The inclination to keep a child was described as 'the "in" thing … 'the error becomes apparent when the child becomes more independent, demanding, less acceptable and "cuddly" at eighteen months onwards'.[31] An annual report from 1972 notes that 'although the majority of the girls now decide to keep their babies, they are frequently immature and unrealistic in their attitude towards their future. They show little grasp of the seriousness of their undertaking and are irresponsible in the extreme. Many of the babies end up in care within a year or two.'[32]

An internal report was commissioned by the BSR in 1968–69 on diocesan social work and moral welfare agencies in England.[33] This survey contained the findings

29 Lambeth Palace Library, MWC/Min/M/2, f.190

30 Lambeth Palace Library, BSR/CSWSS/CHN/1

31 Lambeth Palace Library, BSR/WP/ADOP

32 Lambeth Palace Library, MV700.E6S82 [P]

33 *The Church of England Committee for Diocesan Moral & Social Welfare Councils: REPORT on Secretary's Survey of Diocesan Social Work and Moral Welfare Agencies in England – January 1968 to June 1969* (Church of England Committee for Diocesan Moral and Social Welfare Councils, London, Church House, 1969). This was followed by *Working Proposals following on the Secretary's Survey* (London, 1970).

of visits to almost all diocesan welfare headquarters and reported on the quality of care and standards in homes. Whilst this document does not list the names of dioceses or homes, the BSR had inspected its homes and had rated some as substandard. This then led to an internal document of working proposals following this survey, which noted the need for consideration of 'the wisdom of allowing any association to function in the name of the Church, when such an association will not have regard to any authority, ecclesiastical or secular, in matters relating to policy or practice … Only mother and baby homes of good standard, materially and staff-wise, should be encouraged to continue'.[34] The document noted that the 'shoe-string mentality in the management of residential establishments [may] inflict a lower-than-average standard of living and environment upon a group of people whose need forces them to accept it, and this is no way to set about creating a community which encourages growth towards wholeness'.[35] The document reflects on the desire 'to give full freedom of choice to the mother', the problems associated with accommodation, lack of fostering options or nursery facilities, and a lack of funds, which 'have tended unwittingly to restrict the variety and quality of service available'.

This document looks ahead to the future of provision of mother and baby homes and encourages careful consideration. It notes:

'The present trend for the mother to keep her child, thereby limiting the supply of "ordinary" and "fit" babies for adoption, creates the opportunity for finding homes for the more "difficult to place" children – i.e. those of mixed race or with some physical, mental or social handicap or those who need homes after babyhood because mother or parents cannot cope. More skill, time, patience and resources as well as access to forms of child care other than adoption are going to be needed to fulfil adequately the functions of an adoption agency in the 70s.'

Its advice was clear: 'where there is no adoption officer other than the organising secretary and where there is no group of trained staff or adequate child care resources, [dioceses] would be well advised to consider withdrawing registration unless they can enter into a new relationship with a child care or other voluntary agency to provide a more professionally acceptable service.'

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34 *Working Proposals following on the Secretary's Survey* (London,1970), p.5.

35 *Working Proposals following on the Secretary's Survey* (London,1970), p.5.

Conclusion

This report sets out the guidance, policies and ways of working from national church bodies with regard to mother and baby homes. From what we have learned, we can understand clearly how this affected the culture within homes, the practices of staff workers, and the experiences of mothers and babies. The effects have been profound on mothers, fathers, adoptees and wider families over the course of decades. The committees with day-to-day governance of homes generally had large numbers of women on them; the Church of England's administration and thinking on homes was facilitated by the Organising Secretaries of Diocesan Welfare Councils, who were predominantly female, as was the MWC itself, in its Secretary and Deputy Secretary, certainly in the 1950s.

Yet the voices of the women who were resident in homes run by the Church of England are notably absent from the MWC accounts in minutes, reports and correspondence. Their experience and identities are filtered through the surveys and statistics commissioned by the MWC, and as numbers in the annual reports of the homes. Much of the material unearthed in this study reveals the Church of England talking to itself in its committees and sub-committees, or the words of matrons running the homes in official annual reports.

The absence of the voices of the women most affected is an important issue to acknowledge, and the role of men is often secretive, brushed aside, or authoritarian. The identity of the fathers of the children was generally protected; some faced few consequences, whilst for others their fatherhood was painfully dismissed. Men also feature as chaplains in the homes, whilst bishops and archbishops were patrons or chairs of various committees, diocesan councils, and of the MWC.

The archives at Lambeth Palace Library and other records show that the lack of housing provided by the state for mother and child was a crucial factor in adoptions. Towards the end of the period under review, the BSR was fully aware that the demands on moral welfare workers, agencies and homes meant that options were not being presented to mothers. The BSR was also aware that the quality of the homes did not always meet an acceptable standard because of financial constraints.

Staffing is another issue, with matrons suffering from burnout and homes over capacity. At a time when girls (some as young as fourteen) and women were away from their own homes (often far away) and in a vulnerable position, in an environment that set them apart and in a situation where society favoured a level of secrecy, the circumstances for potential influence on choices may have been in place from other, more 'powerful' individuals with authority – from the matron and

her assistants to the chaplain who ministered to the pastoral needs of the staff and residents of the home.

The research undertaken here enables us to understand the potential scale of this issue. Along with this, we understand better the different types of residences, their function, and that adoptions were facilitated from diocesan agencies, from some of the homes, from shelters and even from the private accommodation of mothers. We also now have a clearer idea as to how the homes were run and where they were located within the structures of the Church of England, how thinking shifted as the period went on. We now have a much better idea of what kinds of archive documents are held at Lambeth Palace Library, and what kinds of records and information would most usefully be searched for in other archives. Diocesan and area annual reports of their moral welfare councils would provide further information about the local picture.

This research has also been an act of remembering, in terms of the Church of England's lack of institutional memory for something it was deeply involved with, and which lies within the living memory of many women. Most importantly the aim of this paper is to be of service to the women and their children whose lives were impacted by the structures of the Church of England, its thinking and its moral imperatives as outlined here, and through the things that happened as a result, because with every statistic is a lived experience: children whose lives began in these homes who were adopted, placed in foster care, or kept by their mother. We are also aware of infants who tragically died whilst they were in the care of these homes.

In an annual report of one shelter, a new adopting mother wrote of her experience and included this interaction with the foster mother as the baby was handed to her: ' "She can travel in what she is wearing, and you can send it all back – except the dress. That was a parting gift from her mother." 'I looked at the little white dress with its blue smocking and realised with a pang that this spelt heartbreak. But I was not privileged to understand quite how much heartbreak.'[36]

36 Lambeth Palace Library, MV700.E6C69 [P]

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Any primary sources not listed here can be found in Lambeth Palace Library using the call numbers as set out in the footnotes.

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