

“Let the Children Live”

There is an odd, but fortunate connection between New Zealand Methodist Church’s *Let the Children Live* vision, Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas and the Mornington Methodist Women’s Fellowship.

In 2001 a group of enthusiasts in Dunedin launched The Really Authentic Gilbert and Sullivan Performance Trust (RAGSPT) with the aim of staging, in chronological order, all Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas. As a result, an eleven-year production cycle began in 2002 and ended in 2012.

Before the staging of the first opera in 2002, Emeritus Professor Colin Gibson, chairman of RAGSPT and a member of Mornington Methodist Church, invited church women to serve tea, coffee and biscuits during performance intervals with the profits going to church funds. For a decade, a loyal group – mostly members of Mornington Methodist Women’s Fellowship (MWF) – served refreshments during each opera season. After the final production, RAGSPT generously donated the 2012 catering profits to the MWF, in acknowledgement of members’ help throughout the eleven-year cycle. About the time of this unexpected windfall, the Dunedin Methodist Mission Hub in South Dunedin was seeking help in providing Welcome Packs for newborn babies.

Methodist Mission Southern took over the running of the South Dunedin Early Years Service Hub in 2011. According to the 2014 deprivation index, South Dunedin is now the most deprived urban area in the South Island where a high number of families with children, aged less than six years, live in vulnerable circumstances. Welfare, health and education indicators have shown significant disparities between the outcomes for these children and children of the same age living elsewhere. To ensure vulnerable children receive the support they need, the Early Years Service Hub, at the former Forbury School site, provides a community centre for families. Available on-site services include ante-natal care; the Well Child-*Tamariki Ora* programme; early childhood education; parenting information, education and support; and supported referrals to off-site services, for instance health services. The gift-parcel idea emerged as a means for the Hub to begin a relationship with new South Dunedin families on a positive note.

Since October 2012, members of Mornington MWF have provided these Welcome Packs. Each parcel contains booties and one other baby garment, beautifully handknitted by MWF members or by members of supportive women’s organizations. A facecloth and other small items are enclosed and the package is attractively wrapped. Plunket, Catholic Social Services Birth Support Group and *Arai Te Uru* Well Child nurse hand out these gifts to mothers of each newborn child. The feedback has been astonishing. The mothers feel loved. At the same time they are introduced to the Mission’s services.

The story does not end there. When the RAGSPT money was almost depleted, the New Zealand Methodist Church announced its *Let the Children Live – Funding Parish Initiatives* grants. The MWF with the Dunedin Methodist Parish Council’s blessing applied for and received a grant. Not only were members enormously grateful to the Connexion, but also relieved to know the supply of their baby-gift parcels for the Hub would continue. After all, every New Zealand child deserves the best possible start in life.

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