

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

Sister Oonah HANRAHAN

Support person present: No

Others present: Denis Moloney, Solicitor, Donnelly & Wall Solicitors

1. My name is Oonah Hanrahan. I was previously known as Sister Philip, which was the name given to me at my profession. Many sisters returned to using their baptismal names in latter years, but I was one of the later ones to do so because I was a teacher in Belfast for such a long time, and I thought it would be confusing to change it whilst I was still teaching. I reverted to my family name when I retired from teaching. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1942 . My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

The Sisters of Nazareth

2. I joined the Sisters of Nazareth in 1960.
3. After our training period and profession, I went to college in Southampton and did three years of primary school teacher training.
4. My first teaching post was in Derry in 1964. I was there for three years. I was then asked to come to Belfast where I taught in our school for just a little over a year.
5. I was then requested to go to Bexhill-on-Sea and was there for almost seven years. I was asked to come back to Derry in 1975, and I taught there for one term. I had

some trouble with my back during that period, so that is when I came out of teaching for a little while.

6. I was asked to go and work with the children in Isleworth, Middlesex at the beginning of 1976. Around November of that year, I was asked to go to Kilmarnock and I left Middlesex on 1 December 1976.
7. I was in Kilmarnock from December until May 1977. I have been told that the information provided to the Inquiry by the order is that I was in Kilmarnock from 1 December 1976 until 4 May 1977. That makes sense. I didn't think I had been a full six months there. It isn't usual to spend such a short time in a place, but it could happen. Sometimes when you are asked to move, it might be to facilitate something else, like a sister getting sick somewhere or somebody requesting a move. You didn't always know why you were being requested to go somewhere, and you didn't ask the reasons why. Obviously I was needed in Kilmarnock at the time and was asked to go there, so I went.
8. One of the few times when I knew why I was being asked to go to a place was when I went to Bexhill-on-Sea. A sister had left the order and the only other teacher available was one of her relatives. For some reason they decided they wouldn't send her there, so I was asked to go.
9. After Kilmarnock, I went to Plymouth to help out. I wasn't in any senior role. I think I was there until October 1977.
10. I then went to Middlesbrough and worked with children there until January 1980, when I was asked to come back to teaching, back to Belfast, and I've been here ever since.

Nazareth House, Kilmarnock

11. I didn't have to go through any kind of interview process before going to Kilmarnock. You were kind of requested by the order to go to places, but it was assumed that you would agree to the requests. That was how we worked. I didn't have any problem about going to Kilmarnock.
12. I never went through any vetting or checking process. I don't think that kind of thing existed then, as I didn't go through it even when I was going for my teaching posts.
13. I think there was a Catholic Children's Society and the sisters all went to Glasgow for an ongoing formation meeting, but there were no formal childcare courses or training in Kilmarnock. Other than my teaching qualification, I didn't do any other training or childcare courses before I went to Kilmarnock. I did short courses in connection with childcare when I was in Middlesbrough, but that was after I had been in Kilmarnock.

My role and responsibilities

14. My role was to create a homely atmosphere for the children. I acted as housemother in my own group. I suppose the idea was to create as homely and normal an environment for children who weren't actually in their own homes or in a normal environment. The children did as many normal things as other children did. I remember it being a homely place.
15. I didn't get a formal explanation of my role or any kind of induction period. My general responsibilities were to be there for the children, to provide an order to their day and to see to their welfare. We didn't have to cook the meals. We had a central kitchen and a lovely sister who was a very good cook. I think her name was Sister Columbiere.
16. There were two groups of children in the house. If I remember correctly, there were several small family units, brothers and sisters together, in my group. As far as I

remember, siblings were kept together. I don't remember any child having a family member in the other group.

17. I can't remember exactly how many children were there. I've been trying to go through the names in my head. I'm guessing I had about twelve to fifteen in my group, but there could have been more. I think the age range was from about four or five up to sixteen. I know there was a girl who must have been about fifteen or sixteen. She always stood out. I don't think she had any family members there. She was a beautiful girl.
18. I don't know what my first impressions of the home were, but my lasting impression was that they were lovely children. That's what I remember even when I can't remember names and faces. In other postings and in my teaching career, I have come across children who were troubled and had behavioural problems, but I don't remember any of that in Kilmarnock. They were really nice children.

Other sisters and staff

19. The sister superior in the house was Sister [REDACTED] LMF? . I remember her because I had lived with her before in Derry. The sister who had most to do with the children was Sister [REDACTED] LGO . She was responsible for the other group of children. She was the senior sister, but we ran our groups independently and she didn't interfere with mine.
20. I think Sister [REDACTED] LGO was responsible for records and other such things. For example, I don't remember knowing why the children were with us. You automatically assume that something had gone wrong at home, maybe illness or separation, for the children to be brought into care. I wouldn't have known their case histories. My feeling about that on reflection is that it was a protection for the children. It would have been a matter of confidentiality. That's what I'm assuming.
21. I would have been ultimately accountable to the sister superior, but my day-to-day dealings with regard to the affairs of the children would have been with Sister

LGO

I would say she operated in a sort of mentoring and supervisory role. I just remember her being a very supportive person.

22. I had two female staff. I don't remember their names, nor do I remember if they were full-time or part-time.
23. There were no changes to personnel or roles during my time in Kilmarnock.

Layout of the house

24. The house itself was big. In one section of it there were elderly residents, but the children's part was in a separate part of the building. I think we weren't very far from the town centre.
25. My group and Sister

LGO

 shared a dining room, but we had our own lovely, big sitting rooms on the ground floor. The two sitting rooms were both on the same side of the corridor and the dining room was on the opposite side. The bedroom areas were upstairs. That's my memory of it. I can't remember if the bedrooms for both groups were on the same floor.
26. The bedrooms were nice, bright colours. There were little sliding doors across the rooms. I think it might have been a large area that was divided. All the children had a place to keep their clothes and belongings in their room. There were three or four beds in a room. I remember one little bedroom with four beds in it. I slept in a small room near where the children slept.

Children's routine and life in Nazareth House

Admission

27. There may be records that could prove me wrong, but I don't have any recollection of any children being admitted into the home when I was there. It seemed to be a settled group that was there when I arrived and when I left.

Mornings and bedtime

28. I don't know what time the children were expected to get up in the morning. I presume about an hour to an hour and a half before school time. I suppose it would have been about half past seven or eight o'clock.
29. The children would get washed, dressed, put their school uniforms on and then go off to school after they'd had some breakfast.
30. I don't remember if any of the children had problems with bedwetting. It's very likely that there would have been a child that would have had that problem. I have been asked how that would be dealt with. We would just remove the bedclothes. Washing clothes and changing beds probably would have been dealt with when the children weren't there. If a child had wet the bed, they would have had the opportunity to wash and clean up before they got dressed.
31. I think bedtime was staggered. Obviously younger children went first and the older girls and boys had different bedtimes.
32. My bedroom was on the same floor as the children's bedrooms. I was within call so to speak. If I remember correctly, the staff weren't resident, so I would be there at night if a child needed me. If the children needed to get up through the night to go to the toilet, they were free to do so. They didn't need to come to me for permission.

Washing and bathing

33. I don't think the shower age had really come in at that time. I think it tended to be baths then. Baths wouldn't have been a nightly occurrence for each child. I don't think the whole group would have bathed every night. I don't recollect, but I imagine so many children would have had a bath each night. There would have been hot water and basins available for the others. The children didn't share a bath and clean water was drawn for each child.

Clothes

34. All the children had their own clothes. They didn't wear a uniform in the house. I'm sure we bought the clothes for the younger children. I think the older ones would probably have gone out and bought their own. I remember going down to town and buying basic things like tights.
35. I presume the staff and I washed and ironed the clothes. I think that's probably what we were doing when the children were out at school.

Food

36. They definitely had cereal and toast for breakfast, but I have a feeling that some days they also had a choice of porridge and possibly a fry. I've been in other houses and in lots of the houses they had cereal plus something else, so I'm assuming it was the same in Kilmarnock. That would have been the norm.
37. I don't have any memory of making packed lunches, so I'm assuming the children had school meals. I think they probably had milk or juice when they came home from school.
38. I think evening meals would have been around half past five or six o'clock. The food was very nice. They got lovely, hot meals. We got the same food and I thought it was very nice. I was a little bit fascinated because they had some Scottish things, like

bridies and stovies, that I had never heard of. These were actually very nice. I thought we were fortunate as we had a very good cook. She was generous and there was variety.

39. I don't remember having any problems getting children to eat. They all seemed to be very normal, hungry children. There would have been enough food available to provide an alternative if there was one specific thing a child didn't want to eat. I don't think a child would have been forced to eat something. I had lots of dislikes myself, so I couldn't ever see myself forcing somebody to take something they really didn't want.

Leisure time

40. The children had their own toys and we had a big television and games in the sitting room. I think there would have been books there too. Obviously they would play outside if the weather was good. There was a grassy space and a big climbing frame for play. I remember we had a cold period and there was a lot of snow, but the children went out then as well and they were fine.
41. They were involved in lots of activities outside. I think the children did Scottish dancing. I know a couple of the girls used to do majorettes. They did all the normal things. They went to the cinema and swimming. I don't remember going with them. It would have been the staff or the older ones taking their younger siblings out. They got pocket money and went down to town. I don't remember how much they got. Normally, they got pocket money according to their age.
42. I don't think we had the facilities to let them learn skills such as baking. We didn't actually have cooking facilities at that time. I don't think the children went into the main kitchen. That would have been a health and safety issue.

Work

43. I think we had a kind of scale of little chores. Setting and clearing the tables and tidying the rooms would be the kind of chores they did. It would be normal practice to have some little chore, but it would be age-related. Some children wouldn't be able to do things. I think it would have been on a rota basis. I don't think they were always given the same thing to do. Children would be the first to object if you gave them the same job all the time.
44. I don't remember if I ever involved any of the older children in washing or ironing the clothes. It is possible that they would have helped to look after their own clothes. You would normally look after things like polishing shoes for children, but possibly the older children helped with that too.

Holidays

45. I don't remember any organised trips or holidays. I wasn't there during the summer holidays.

Christmas and birthdays

46. The house was decorated for Christmas. It was nice. We had our own Christmas meal in the house and the children got presents. Some children, not many, had family members visiting and they probably brought presents too. They also got invited to parties. I don't remember if any children got the opportunity to go and spend time with their families at Christmas.
47. The children's birthdays were celebrated. A cake would come from the kitchen and they'd get a gift.

Schooling

48. I think the younger ones went to school in a minibus. We had a minibus and a driver. I think the secondary school kids were within walking distance of the school. I don't remember the names of the schools. I think most of the children were Catholic and went to Catholic schools.
49. I think they got homework at primary and secondary school. They probably did it in the big sitting room. The staff and I would have been there to assist them. The older children might have gone up to their rooms if they wanted some privacy, but I'm just surmising that.
50. I don't remember ever going to a school parents' meeting. It's likely these would have taken place at the beginning and end of the school year, and I was only there from December to May. Being a teacher myself, I think I would have remembered if I had gone down to a school.

Religious instruction

51. We didn't have religious instruction as such. We had religious practice, as I would call it. For example, there would have been mass on Sunday and we probably said a little prayer together in the evening. That's the usual practice.

Healthcare

52. There would have been a nursing sister in the community working with the elderly, but she wouldn't have had a role in the children's department. Children would still have seen a nurse in school for things like hearing and sight tests at that time.
53. There would have been a visiting GP. That was the practice everywhere, so I'm assuming it was the practice in Kilmarnock. I don't know how regular the visits would

have been. We would have had systems where routine health checks were done to note height, weight, etc of the children. These things were obligatory, so that would have been the practice at all times. I think if there were any medical records kept in the house, outside of what was held at the doctors' surgery, these would have been kept by Sister [REDACTED] LGO

54. I think the children would have gone to the local dentist. I have no recollection of any child in my care requiring to go to hospital.
55. There were definitely no deaths among the children during my time in Kilmarnock.

Visitors

56. There wasn't a set visitors' day. I don't remember many children having visits from their families. I know there was one father who visited his children, and the only reason I remember that is because he contacted me relatively recently. I don't remember children having days out or weekends with their families. It doesn't mean it didn't happen, I just don't remember it.
57. I don't remember whether the children were encouraged to try and keep in contact with their families by means of writing or telephoning. Obviously that would depend on why the children were in care in the first place
58. The children didn't get regular visits from social workers. I don't remember meeting many social workers, and I don't remember a case conference. Maybe it wasn't the practice to have case conferences then. There were frequent case conferences in latter years. My experience in other places is that case conferences were held in our houses and we were present. Sister [REDACTED] LGO might have seen social workers when I didn't, but I'm not sure about that.
59. I don't know if there were any other people visiting the home who would have had access to the children. I know that visitors to other parts of the house would not have

had access to the children's part of the house. It was a kind of custom in our places that even, for example, sisters working with the elderly would not be walking into our part of the house, and we wouldn't go into their area. The units were kept separate that way.

60. I think the local parish priest said mass for the sisters, probably once a week, when the children were there, but there were no other visits from priests or trainee priests.

Discipline and punishment

61. I don't remember any very disruptive issues. I've been trying to think about how a child would have been sanctioned. I think maybe going to bed a little bit earlier, missing a television programme or being given a little chore to do. I don't remember any serious incidents when a child had to be sanctioned. There was never any use of corporal punishment during my time in Kilmarnock.
62. I have been asked whether there were any written or unwritten codes of conduct or rules of behaviour. I don't remember as such. I don't know what sort of behaviour would have merited a sanction and an entry in the punishment book. The worst thing that could probably happen would be fighting with each other or maybe bullying. That's all I can think of. I don't remember having very aggressive children. They didn't have the opportunity to do anything terribly bad. Their day was very full and they were very normal kids, so I presume something like squabbling or not doing something they were supposed to do were the kind of things they'd be disciplined for.

Abuse

63. I did not witness any behaviour from staff, other sisters or children that I considered to be abusive. And I didn't notice any behaviours from the children that would indicate abuse, but then I didn't know their backgrounds. In latter years through my teaching, I would have had experience of behaviours of children who had been abused and I didn't notice anything like that in Kilmarnock.
64. No children ever brought concerns to me about anyone else's treatment of them. I would have reported it immediately if they had done. I can't remember if there was a written procedure for reporting matters. It wasn't like nowadays. But you would report it first to the senior sister, Sister LGO and also the superior, and then social workers if they were involved. I think the social workers would have been informed through Sister LGO
65. I have been asked whether I think my relationship with the children was such that they would have been able to bring any concerns to me. I would hope so, but obviously abuse by its very nature is something children find very difficult to talk about.
66. I have been asked whether looking back with the benefit of hindsight there is anything in relation to the interaction amongst the children, or between the children and the carers, that would concern me today that wasn't sufficient to concern me at the time. No, my overall memory is that it was a stable environment and the children were very lovely and normal, considering that they had been removed from their own homes.
67. I have never learned of any reports of abuse or any subsequent investigations into the home from around the time I was there.

Inspections

68. I have no recollection of any local authority inspections taking place, and we didn't have a visitation by our own congregation during my five months in Kilmarnock.
69. It was usual practice to make available all the books and records we kept for inspections. These would also be inspected by our own congregation when they did visitations. When a visitation was carried out, an official stamp would be put on the records showing the name of the person who visited and the date.

Records

70. We kept a kind of logbook in our own group for recording what the children were doing each day. It was a hardback book. You put the date in and wrote down whatever the children had done, what activities they had gone out to. I wrote it up every night, probably while the children were watching television. I think any visits from social workers would also have been noted in the book.
71. There was a sanction book, which was called a punishment book, where you made an entry if you had to sanction a child. I think the two groups had their own punishment books.
72. I think we had a menu book. There may have been one in the dining room. We had to have a record of the food the children got. I don't mean the amounts they got, but what they got daily. I'm assuming it was to show variety. That's one of the things that would have been looked at when inspections were being carried out. It would also have been inspected by our congregation when they did visitations.
73. There would have been a formal book where discharges were recorded, which probably was kept by Sister [REDACTED] LGO. I don't think any children were discharged during my time there.

Other information

- 74. I had no contact with anybody in Kilmarnock until I got a very nice letter from a man named Mr [REDACTED] about two years ago. This came out of the blue. He is the father of some of the children I looked after in Kilmarnock. He would not have known me as Sister Oonah, but that's how he addressed me in the letter, so he must have made inquiries. He came to visit us here in Belfast. I am thinking that he possibly heard about the Inquiry and started to think back. I have provided the Inquiry with a photocopy of his letter.

- 75. I would hope that nothing ever happened in Kilmarnock that I should have known about, and that no child ever needed anything and I wasn't aware of it. I would always hope that that didn't happen.

- 76. I might have got some of the dates a little bit confused and some of the details I have provided are very vague, but I was in Kilmarnock forty years ago which is a long time ago.

- 77. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed..... [REDACTED]

Dated..... *26 February 2018*