

Redefining Orphan Care: Encouraging Christian Communities to Engage in Foster Care

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Introduction

Foster children, like all children, desire a safe and loving family. The foster care system does not always meet these needs, and this is a failure on the part of the state. The Christian community has the potential to ameliorate this state deficiency. However, when I interviewed Randy Loveless, an adoptive father and the Church Partnership Liaison at a local foster care adoption agency, he remarked that a common sentiment he encounters among Washington State Social Workers is that the church is a “sleeping giant” with regard to foster care and adoption. I found this surprising, and in part, this statement inspired my pursuit of this thesis topic. Matthew Savage, a pastor and adoptive father, echoed this sentiment at the “Awake Snohomish County Breakfast,” asking: “How did the church fall asleep on the issue of foster care and orphan care?” Although some followers of Christ who seek a life that reflects their faith do care for foster children, adding more support from Christian individuals, churches, and institutions to the foster care system draws foster children away from the margins of society and helps them find a sense of belonging.

The biblical directive to help foster children is not only for foster families. Some Christian families care for foster children in this way, and yes, the United States needs more of them. Nevertheless, churches have additional capacity to support foster families and address the needs of foster children. More Christian communities need to capitalize on their church networks, partner with the government, or volunteer with secular or para-church organizations to assist children impacted by foster care. Through conducting research in Washington State, it is clear that more Christian communities need to become aware of, and engaged in, the issues surrounding foster care. If the church ignores this marginalized population, there is a cost:

children grow up believing the lie that they are unloved, unvalued, and unworthy of care. But foster children are worthy of care.

There are many marginalized and hurting children in American society who are desperate for stability. The American church is underrepresented in the movement to help these children. This needs to change. The Christian community can provide hope to foster children through redefining their concept of orphan care, along with combining the three elements of faith, awareness, and directed action to engage in local orphan care. First, followers of Christ who seek to live a faith more resonant with biblical themes need to rethink the concept of “orphan” to include foster children. Then they need to examine their faith in order to learn why orphan care is essential to Christianity and how faith transforms the practice of foster care. Third, churches need to learn more about what issues exist in the foster care system and become more deeply aware of foster care as a social justice issue. Finally, the Christian community must engage in action to advocate for change towards a more just church and society that cares for marginalized and vulnerable children.

Redefining Orphans and Orphan Care

The American Christian community needs to reshape their views on the biblical concept of an “orphan” and what orphan care entails to include caring for children in foster care. Western culture dramatizes orphans as lost and lonely foreign children in need of rescue, and “This dominant model of the ‘universal’ orphan disconnects him/her from any social, biographical, cultural or historical context” (Emond 415). Churches must support foster children, the “orphans” of the United States. Although many foster children are not truly orphans, a closer look at the Bible’s references to orphans and the fatherless reveals that God calls His followers to care for “kids who need families” (“A Biblical Index” 1) – foster children. In the Bible, orphans

and the fatherless receive “God’s love and protection” (“A Biblical Index” 2). Likewise, the Christian community should love and protect foster children. An examination of scripture substantiates the concept of expanding Christian ministry from traditional orphan care to include caring for other populations on the margins of society, such as children and youth in foster care.

The conventional definition of an orphan is a child who has no living parents. However, in the United States it is rare for children to be orphans by this definition; in 2015, only 1% of children who entered foster care experienced the death of a parent (The AFCARS Report 2). Here, children are most often legal orphans, meaning one or both biological parents are alive but cannot care for their children. The two most common reasons children enter foster care are neglect and parental drug abuse (The AFCARS Report 2). Other common issues that lead to foster care placements are physical abuse, inadequate housing, or parental incarceration (The AFCARS Report 2). After children enter foster care, there are several case plan goals. The primary goal is to reunify families if it is safe for children to return to the custody of their biological parent(s). These children remain vulnerable because of their experience with foster care, and may reenter care if their home environment returns to an unstable state (Carr 116). Other case plan outcomes include: placement with relatives, adoption, long-term foster care, emancipation, or permanent guardianship (The AFCARS Report 3). Before adoption is possible, the court needs to terminate parental rights, after which the child becomes legally free – a legal orphan.

Children impacted by foster care embody the biblical concept of the orphaned and fatherless. Although the Bible refers to orphans and the fatherless many times, it does not define orphans. However, the 43 passages in the Bible that include the fatherless, and single reference to the orphan (Strong 383, 865), paint a picture of who the biblical concept of an orphan

includes. In addition to understanding the biblical concept of orphanhood, these references to the fatherless and the orphan, along with the five references to adoption (Strong 16), offer insight into the concept of orphan care. Several passages about orphans and the fatherless imply that the biblical concept of orphanhood includes foster children.

The structure of our society can marginalize children impacted by foster care. This makes them vulnerable. The Bible identifies the fatherless as a vulnerable population within each community's context. Two passages that describe the fatherless as vulnerable are: Job 29:12, which talks about "the fatherless who had none to assist him;" and Psalm 10:14, which describes God as "the helper of the fatherless" (*New International Version Study Bible*). The first example of vulnerability is a person who has no advocate; the passage in Psalms identifies God as the orphan's helper, which indicates the orphan is in a vulnerable state. Applying these concepts to today's society, the biblical concept of orphans and the fatherless translates to a much broader definition than the conventional one. American Christians need to reconceptualize "orphan" to include our society's equivalent: children and youth in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care. These children are "orphans" in the biblical sense because they are vulnerable children who do not have adequate care or have anyone to advocate for them.

Let me be clear: I am not advocating for calling foster children orphans. I *am* pointing out that followers of Christ need to consider foster children when they read biblical passages that refer to orphans and the fatherless. Christian communities who want to live out biblical themes need to be more inclusive about who they serve in "orphan care" initiatives. The Bible refers to "the fatherless" more often than the "orphan" (Strong 383, 865). A closer look at verses about the fatherless reveals they refer to vulnerable people within the community. The patriarchal structure of society during biblical times isolated those without a male head of household, but

“Despite their isolation and certain death had they been part of a neighboring nation, the authors of the biblical text give specific commands... of [extending] hospitality and [seeking] social justice” (Yeats 66) for orphans and the fatherless. Likewise, instead of focusing solely on children without parents, the Christian community needs to expand their concept of orphan care to include foster care as well. This also means that churches need to engage more with the foster care community.

With a new view of the biblical concept of orphanhood, the accompanying concept of orphan care becomes much more complex than adopting or housing foster children. Biblical references to a community’s role in the lives of orphans and the fatherless contain three primary themes of action throughout the Old and New Testaments: to defend, provide for, and not oppress orphans and the fatherless. A fourth theme, predominantly present in the New Testament, is adoption.

The Bible describes God as the defender or helper of orphans (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 10:14; Ps. 10:17-18; Pr. 23:10; Jer. 49:11; Hos. 14:3). The Bible also instructs leaders and Christians to defend the cause of orphans (Ps. 82:3; Is. 1:17; Jas. 1:27). Defending foster children in the United States includes advocating for child-sensitive social policies at the civic, state, or national level. It also includes acknowledging that foster care is a social justice issue. Churches must follow God’s example and be community leaders who defend foster children and engage in action to counteract the injustices present within the foster care system.

There are many ways to provide for foster children. In the Old Testament, providing for orphans involved: including them in feasts (Deut. 16:14), allowing them to glean during the harvest (Deut. 24:19-21), and sharing the tithe with orphans (Deut. 14:28-29; Deut. 26:12-13). The Old Testament also mentions that God sustains the fatherless (Ps. 146:9). The New

Testament includes one verse on this topic that implores followers of Christ “to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (Jas. 1:27). In these passages, the community includes orphans in events, provides them with food, and gives money and/or goods (the tithe) to meet their basic needs. In other words, caring for orphans was “the responsibility of the entire community” (Yeats 67). Similarly, caring for foster children, or partnering with people who do, is a responsibility of the Christian community. Churches can provide for children in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care in the community through actions such as ensuring food security, donating to organizations that support families, and providing stable foster homes.

The Old Testament contains many warnings to not oppress orphans. These come in the form of direct commands to not oppress or take advantage of the fatherless (Exod. 22:22; Zech. 7:10) and portraying oppression and cruelty towards orphans as a negative quality (Ps. 94:6; Ezek. 22:7). The Bible also contains examples of the consequences of oppressing orphans. These include: being cursed, punished, or experiencing suffering (Deut. 27:19; Is. 10:2; Mal. 3:5). It is evident from these commands, negative examples, and cautions, that God condemns oppressing orphans. In addition to the command to not exploit orphans, these verses show that orphans “are so precious to God that he will personally judge those who fail to account for their needs” (Yeats 67). Few people intentionally oppress children in the United States. However, actions like socially excluding foster children are oppressive and harmful to their healthy development. The foster care system itself often traumatizes foster children (Bruskas 70), which is another form of oppression. Caring for foster children, then, includes minimizing oppression, actively seeking to not oppress orphans, and decreasing the marginalization of children and youth impacted by foster care.

The New Testament contains most of the passages that mention adoption. One verse in the Old Testament, Psalm 68:5, mentions God as a father to the fatherless, which parallels the modern concepts of foster and adoptive parenting. The New Testament passages are about God's adoption of Christians as sons, so that they inherit eternal life through God's grace (Rom. 8:15; Rom. 8:23; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). The human act of adopting orphans reflects God's adoption of humans, and is part of biblical orphan care. Just as followers of Christ become part of God's family, children who were once "orphans" join a new family through adoption from foster care.

These new definitions of orphan and orphan care lay the foundation for understanding who orphans are in the United States, along with the biblical concepts that contribute to a broader approach to orphan care. Orphans include children who are in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care. Orphan care includes defending, providing for, not oppressing, as well as adopting children and youth from foster care. Evidently, it is not limited to "a set of parents taking on the child of another" (Yeats 69). Instead, orphan care seeks justice for the marginalized and vulnerable children in the United States. In more practical terms, holistic orphan care includes elements such as foster care, foster family support services, foster care prevention, family preservation services, advocacy, and adoption. It also includes empowering biological families. When families have the tools and resources they need to better care for their children, it prevents children from entering foster care or facilitates reunification. Throughout this paper I refer to local orphan care and foster care, which I use as interchangeable terms that include caring for marginalized and vulnerable children who are in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care. This thesis concentrates on the context of the United States, with a focus on the case study of Washington State. I interviewed several different Christian foster and adoptive mothers, as

well as organizational representatives to collect data for this case study. All the mothers' names within this paper are pseudonyms to protect their identities, and those of their children.

Faith

Americans have many reasons for engaging in foster care. For Christians, faith is often the reason why they care for orphans. The Christian faith community “has a long history of providing child and family welfare services” (Engle et al. 194), which sets a precedent that applies to the foster care context. Caring for orphans is part of the Christian faith tradition and is a theme in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The oft-quoted verse in the realm of orphan care, James 1:27, expresses caring for orphans and widows as “true religion and Christian practice” (Yeats 66). And yet, followers of Christ do not engage in orphan care solely because of a sense of religious duty. Faith acts as a catalyst for action, but orphan care is not a religious moral imperative. That is, one does not need to engage in orphan care to be a good Christian. Rather, it is because of what Jesus did for them that Christians serve orphans and vulnerable children. It is not a religious or moral duty, but an act of service and worship. Engaging in orphan care comes from a deeper place, in response to the principles laid out in the Bible. Christians who seek to live out the gospel base their approach to foster care on faith. In fact, Christians who care for foster children express “the heart of the gospel [which is] to seek and save the lost, to reach out to the forgotten and the oppressed, to love sacrificially, and to pour [their] lives out so that others can catch a glimpse of Jesus” (Carr 123). Engaging in foster care is an expression of the Christian community’s deep desire to make a difference in the lives of children and their response to the stirring of the Holy Spirit.

Starting with why churches engage in orphan care – a combination of faith and a desire to help hurting children – creates a more sustainable motivation for engagement. It is the same

principle that Sinek applies to successful leaders: knowing why you do what you do “is the only way to maintain a lasting success and have a greater blend of innovation and flexibility” (50). When churches start with the “what” and care for orphans as a religious duty, instead of the “why,” it can constrain orphan care to action resulting from a sense of obligation to fulfil the commands of the Bible. In contrast, starting with why the Christian community engages in orphan care transforms that external motivation to an internal one. Followers of Christ who seek to live out their faith have an internal sense of why they engage in foster care and make a difference in the lives of children. They express God’s desire to see the Christian community love and embrace all their fellow human beings, regardless of who they are or what they have done. Action then flows from a deeper sense of direction than a superficial desire to “follow the rules” and care for foster children because it is “what Christians should do.” In order to move past the “what” to understand the “why,” Christians need to learn more about how their faith relates to foster care.

When Christian communities explore the theology behind orphan care, they better understand the link between their faith and foster care. Christian theology promotes “the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, [which shape] a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive” (Volf 21). Part of creating a more just society is caring for the vulnerable populations within that society. A relationship with God can empower followers of Christ to live outside themselves, stretch their capabilities, and love orphans in ways they could not conceive of without God’s love flowing through them. As Volf asserts, “Having been embraced by God, [Christians] must make space for others in [themselves] and invite them in” (129) to their lives, communities, and homes.

The Christian faith promotes caring for orphans, and faith serves as both a catalyst to engage in orphan care and a sustaining force that empowers families to deal with the challenges they face. “Tiffany’s” faith helped her through five years of uncertainty on her and her husband’s journey towards adopting their daughter. “Tiffany” and her husband decided to adopt from foster care, and had multiple children placed with them throughout this time period who returned to their biological families. It was heartbreaking each time a child left, yet this heartbreak mixed with hope for the child’s future with their biological family (“Tiffany”). “Tiffany” and her husband continued to love and embrace every child who entered their home. When she reflects on that time and how her faith influenced her capacity to cope, she stated: “I always seek God, but during the hard times that’s really where you can feel it. [Seeking God through prayer] was really a big part of faith during the process [of adopting their daughter]” (“Tiffany”). Christian foster and adoptive parents like “Tiffany” and her husband lean on their faith to cope with the uncertainty and challenges they experience.

Christianity not only entreats its followers to care for orphans; it also supports those who choose to internalize this mandate to love and care for children in, from, and at risk of entering, foster care. Understanding the different ways that orphan care weaves into the story and practice of Christianity enables Christians to see that it is more than a religious obligation. Rather, orphan care is an expression of faith. Faith includes belief in God, and the belief that Jesus died for the sins of every person. As a result of this sacrifice and the grace that God extended to humanity, followers of Christ reflect God’s adoption of humanity, express neighbor love, and live out the Great Commission through missional living. These three aspects of the gospel are integral to the practice of orphan care, and provide the biblical basis of why it is important for the Christian community to engage in orphan care.

Vertical Adoption

God's adoption of humankind, referred to as vertical adoption (Cruver 50; Merida and Morton 32), serves as a model for human adoption and care of orphans. Vertical adoption, accomplished through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, is a divine example of social justice (Yeats 69). Adoption is also an expression of grace, redemption, and reconciliation (Cruver 15; Merida and Morton 33). Vertical adoption forms a new spiritual family; human adoption reflects this transformation. Understanding this reflection prompts Christians to engage in orphan care and adoption (Moore 180). For "Kelsey," adopting her daughter from foster care was a "spiritual experience" that cemented her concept of vertical adoption. Throughout the adoption process, "Kelsey" and her husband reflected on "how God has adopted [them], and He has changed [their] name and brought [them] into His family." When they received their daughter's new birth certificate, seeing their names listed as her mother and father reflected the transformation that Christians go through when God adopts them ("Kelsey"). Orphans experience the helplessness and hopelessness of being alone in the world, much like humanity after the fall.

The biblical narrative begins with a whole, healthy relationship between God and man, but when sin entered the world, that relationship broke (Gen. 3:4-24). God made a new covenant relationship with humanity through Jesus' redeeming sacrifice on the cross that led to God's adoption of humankind into His family (John 3:16; Rom. 8:14-17). Through heavenly adoption, Christians find their identity in Christ. Therefore, as sons and daughters of God, followers of Christ become part of a spiritual family. This narrative parallels that of human adoption, in which the original family relationship breaks and adoption creates a new family. Christian communities model this familial belonging through "flesh-and-blood adopting situations" (Moore 190) in the church, providing a tangible picture of grace, redemption, and reconciliation

to unbelievers. For “Kelsey,” adopting her daughter into “a family that truly loves her and cares for her, not just her physical and emotional needs, but her spiritual needs as well” illustrates the sense of belonging that Christians receive when God adopts them into the spiritual family.

Adopting and caring for orphans, then, is an expression of Christian faith that results from God’s love for and adoption of humanity.

Neighbor Love

Orphan care is also an expression of neighbor love. God calls followers of Christ to love their neighbors (Matt. 22:39), and this includes meeting the needs of orphans. As Waters asks, “what neighbor could be more needful than a child whose natural parents are either unable or unwilling to provide the necessary care?” (431-432). Orphan care is an expression of love, which is “at the heart of Christian faith” (Waters 432). Through expressing neighbor love, Christian families transform the lives of orphans, nurturing children because of the love God extends to humanity (Wrobel 313, 321). Hospitality (Wrobel 313; Waters 432) and charity (Waters 424) are values that followers of Christ draw upon to express neighbor love. Christians who seek a life that reflects their faith express hospitality when they welcome children into their homes through foster care and adoption, as well as through caring for children in the community. Charity, the desire to make a difference in the lives of others, often serves as an initial catalyst for involvement in orphan care (Waters 432). However, personal interactions with foster children and youth transform Christians’ motivation from detached charity towards a deeper expression of neighbor love. Followers of Christ who are genuinely concerned about the well-being of the child or children in their care are fueled by this deeper expression of love.

Neighbor love involves sacrifice, “forsaking self-centered living for others-oriented living” (Cruver 64). Engaging in orphan care is others-oriented. It seeks the well-being of

children and youth who may not reciprocate the love they receive from foster parents, adoptive parents, or mentors. Nevertheless, neighbor love is not about personal fulfillment. Granted, reciprocation can occur, and orphan care can be a rich and rewarding experience. It can also be hard.

For “Melanie”, a new foster parent when I interviewed her, every day was a struggle with her children. Her three foster children often acted out, and would “throw fits and temper tantrums because they haven’t identified how they’re feeling, they just know it feels big and scary and wrong” (“Melanie”). Due to their traumatic history, her children have difficulty expressing their emotions, which makes everyday life challenging. Even so, “Melanie” has not lost hope. The church her brother attends in Eastern Washington has many foster families (“Melanie”). While visiting there, she saw children’s lives “so impacted by love from everyone around them that their lives ... changed” (“Melanie”). “Melanie” believes that her children will find a place of “healing and hope” in her home through experiencing familial love, as well as exposure to God’s love in the Christian community. She believes that her children “need a reason [to know] that even with everything they’ve gone through, that they’re going to be okay, and the only reason that [she] can think of is God” (“Melanie”). So, while some days are harder than others, “Melanie” perseveres. Like “Melanie”, it is because of God’s love for humanity that followers of Christ are able to persevere and continue loving others in the midst of difficulty. These Christians express their faith through neighbor love and welcoming orphans into their lives.

Missional Living

The Great Commission is a passage in the Bible that implores followers of Christ to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). A common understanding of this passage

applies it to international missions and adoptions. However, it does not forbid making disciples in your own nation. In fact, “all nations” *should* include one’s own nation along with other nations around the world. Moore agrees, and states that churches need to “consider the plight of children without parents in [their own] neighborhood and across the oceans” (184). Providing a loving environment for foster children to learn and grow as cherished human beings is the primary purpose of engaging in foster care. Secondary to this, outreach ministry, adoption, and foster care can provide an opportunity for the Christian community to teach foster children about God.

Missional living combines the Great Commission with other biblical principles such as neighbor love and applies them to everyday life. When Christians live out the mission of the gospel, they follow in Jesus’ footsteps by entering into a relationship with broken and hurting people in this world (Corbett and Fikkert 37). Orphan care is an expression of missional living that reaches out to hurting children. “Carly” is a biological and foster mother who hopes to adopt a child from foster care. Adoption and foster care resonate with her “in terms of what Christ has done for us, and following or mimicking that same action of adoption and being a father or family to the fatherless” (“Carly”). “Carly” believes her personal relationship with God provides “a core sense of justice,” which makes engaging in orphan care feel innate to her. Without her faith, “Carly” would feel less inclined to engage in orphan care. Individuals like “Carly” and organizations like Antioch Adoptions work to apply the principles of the gospel to orphan care.

Antioch Adoptions, an organization that facilitates adoptions from foster care in Washington, puts it this way: “when you bring a foster child into your home and adopt them, there’s a great opportunity there [to love and disciple the child]” (Loveless). Antioch Adoptions believes that caring for foster children is a way to creatively live out the Great Commission

(Loveless). Including orphan care as part of the Great Commission is not a new concept, but it is a perspective pastors do not often communicate when preaching about the Great Commission (Moore 184). Discipleship involves loving children in a way that shows God's compassionate heart for them.

God's love can provide hope and transformation in the lives of foster children. Christians share this hope with foster children by engaging in local orphan care and living out the gospel. Followers of Christ who adopt or foster children, or serve in outreach ministries, have the opportunity to build positive relationships with children impacted by foster care. For example, mentoring foster children can lead to a discipling relationship. As a result, pursuing the Great Commission extends beyond reaching people and children of other nations. Christians in the United States have the opportunity to apply the Great Commission through missional living and loving children impacted by foster care.

Faith acts as the catalyst for the Christian community to engage in orphan care. In many cases, orphan care entails fostering and adopting children from foster care. Orphan care also includes preventive care initiatives. Learning about God's heart for orphans and people who are hurting creates a deep desire within followers of Christ to make a positive difference in the lives of this vulnerable population. The biblical concepts of vertical adoption, neighbor love, and missional living form the basis of why it is important for Christians to support local orphan care. After understanding why it is important, Christians who seek to live a faith more resonant with these biblical themes need to learn how to help children impacted by foster care.

Awareness

In the second step toward engaging in local orphan care, Christians who seek to actively express their faith learn about what it entails and identify the needs of orphans. Awareness is

more than head knowledge. Developing awareness includes learning and understanding the facts, as well as a deeper, emotional knowing that comes from a place of empathy. Awareness involves developing relationships with children impacted by foster care and families who care for them. It requires the Christian community to learn about children's experiences of foster care. Awareness is a necessary step towards engaging in orphan care because "for people to act on moral or spiritual principles they need to be aware that there is, in fact, a violation of their values" (Goodman 1069). This is why it is critical for followers of Christ who seek a life of service and worship to evaluate their faith and identify the reason why they want to care for orphans. They also need to define their values, and then take steps to develop awareness about the current needs within the system. Emotional and experiential awareness allows the Christian community to move from *knowing about* orphans and orphan care to *knowing* orphans and orphan care.

The issues within local orphan care are not new. And yet, when I first began interviewing people and talking with friends and family about the magnitude of distress within the United States' foster care system, most people were not aware of the scope of the problems. Why is it that such an important issue that affects the lives of thousands of children is not mainstream knowledge? Moe-Lobeda discusses the phenomenon of moral oblivion, which blinds people from seeing social justice issues, instead framing them as "good, inevitable, or normal" (85). Moral oblivion is the opposite of awareness, and to counteract this oblivion, Christian stakeholders who express their faith through orphan care can start conversations about issues related to foster care.

In fact, there is a vibrant community of Christians who actively care for foster children. These existing stakeholders lead the movement by raising awareness within the Christian community. Church leaders need to acknowledge and support these individuals and families as

they seek justice in the foster care system. “Allison,” a biological and foster mother points out that “awareness [about] adoption needs and foster care family needs, [and] more advertising of [them]” must happen in churches. She feels that having “families that are involved [in foster care] speak up about it” can help spread awareness and create a more foster care friendly church environment (“Allison”). “Allison” believes many churches do not raise awareness because “Sometimes it can be hard to get into a church service time. Because they have their schedule planned out, and their sermons planned out, and their announcements planned out, and so it’s not always easy to make it an important issue.” But foster care *is* an important issue. To increase awareness, the Christian community must first learn about the foster care system in the United States, and then focus on their local state system, in this case, Washington State. After learning more about the foster care system, followers of Christ who want to live out their faith identify areas of orphan care that intersect with their existing passions, and develop empathy that leads to action.

Foster Care in the United States

The number of children in foster care in the United States more than doubled between 1985 and 1999, reaching a total of 568,000 children (Swann and Sylvester 309). Swann and Sylvester found that two of the contributing factors to increased foster care caseloads were the increase in female incarceration and a decrease in cash welfare support during this time period (329). Children who “come from families who receive or have received public assistance” are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, and reductions in welfare benefits correlate with an increase in foster care placements (Swann and Sylvester 313). These systemic issues contribute to a lack of family stability and identify populations in need of increased support: families of incarcerated women and families accessing welfare benefits. Although

Swann and Sylvester identify two underlying issues that contribute to foster care, the limited scope of their exploration does not provide a comprehensive account of what caused the increase in the number of children in foster care.

Between 1999 and 2015, the number of children in care declined to 427, 910 (The AFCARS Report 1). This decrease occurred after *The Adoption and Safe Families Act* (ASFA) passed in 1997, with a goal to increase the number of children adopted out of foster care by providing adoption incentives and “seeking to expedite the movement of foster children into adoptive homes” (Schwartz 155). The ASFA also “instituted shorter time limits” for decisions about whether to seek reunification or termination of parental rights, leading to shorter stays in the system for foster children (Swann and Sylvester 311). The decreased length of time allowed to elapse between placement and either returning home to their biological families or adoption placement contributed to the decline in the total number of children in foster care between 1999 and 2015.

Despite the recent decline in the foster care caseload, there is a crisis in the United States’ foster care system. Case managers still have an overwhelming caseload, which can result in case mismanagement that negatively affects foster children (Schwartz 158). The two essential tasks of case management are to ensure children are safe, and that their foster homes meet their basic needs. However, the experience of foster care can traumatize children if they receive no emotional support in addition to these primary goals (Schwartz 167). Although Schwartz does not propose how to decrease the trauma of foster care, Mitchell et al. posit that children in care need to be able to build a trusting relationship with their case manager, have a voice in the decisions made about their placements, have access to information about their case as it progresses, as well as receive compassion and social support when entering care or transferring

between foster homes (181). Of these, Mitchell et al. identify social support as the most meaningful resource for children entering foster care (184). Additionally, a supportive case manager provides a sense of stability for children amidst the turmoil and transition of foster care (Mitchell et al. 184). Mitchell et al. contribute important information about foster children's needs during the transition, but do not acknowledge the practicality that case managers often have limited time to spend on each case. However, case managers should consider children's experiences of the foster care and adoption process, and undertake measures at the systemic level to decrease the traumatic experiences of multiple placements, separation from siblings, and abuse or neglect in foster homes. Case managers with large caseloads have less time to dedicate to advocating for the best interests of each child. Systemic foster care reform that reduces caseloads and creates a more child-sensitive social protection system will benefit case managers and children alike by adjusting the system to consider children's needs.

Adoption and Long-Term Foster Care

When the government introduced ASFA in 1997, they placed a greater emphasis on finding permanence for foster children (Berry et al. 43). Finding permanence for each foster child requires recruiting more families to care for children who are unable to return to their biological parents, and has resulted in two major strategies: adoption and long-term foster care. Other case plan goals include kinship care and long-term guardianship. Each child's case is unique; therefore, adoption is not always the first choice for permanency planning (Mulligan 159). Judges and caseworkers consider the following factors when they choose between the case plan goals of long-term foster care or adoption: the age of the child at placement, level of contact with their biological family, whether or not siblings live in separate homes, and the child's

opinion on foster care versus adoption (Mulligan 159, 160). Involving children in permanency planning honors their right to a voice and opinion about their life experience.

One of the most significant benefits of adoption over long-term foster care is that there is a lower rate of placement breakdown in adoptions (Barth and Miller 447; Mulligan 157). Therefore, adoption provides “a more secure and permanent care arrangement” (Mulligan 160) for children from foster care. Although it is a permanent arrangement, the adjustment for children and adoptive families is a lifelong process (Berry et al. 44). Families created through adoption need support to successfully navigate this adjustment process. Recognizing this need for support is essential for helping adoptive families thrive. Specific ways to support adoptive families warrants further research.

Washington's Foster Care System

Foster children are vulnerable not only because of the initial trauma or precipitating event that placed them in foster care, but also because they experience multiple placements and a continued lack of permanence. Ray and Carter define vulnerable children as those “whose quality of life and ability to fulfil their potential is most affected due to the violation of their rights” (17). Some of the causes of children’s rights violations include: extreme poverty, violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, exclusion, and discrimination by society (Ray and Carter 17). Children removed from their homes by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) can experience one or more of these rights violations before or after entering the foster care system.

Washington’s foster care system is in crisis: in June 2016 alone, children had 211 hotel stays because of a lack of available foster families (Abramo and Ray). Furthermore, approximately 6000 children enter foster care each year in Washington (Casey Family Programs)

and in fiscal year 2014, the most recent report, there were 10,630 children in foster care in Washington (“Numbers of Children in Foster Care” 3). The crisis in Washington’s foster care system perpetuates the significant consequences of child protection violations. Ray and Carter identify these consequences as increased “susceptibility to life-long social, emotional and cognitive impairments and to risky behaviours such as substance abuse, early initiation of sexual behaviour and anti-social behaviour” (29). In Washington, one of these consequences is also an achievement gap in education. Only 43% of Washington’s foster youth graduated from high school on time in 2015, compared with 78% of their non-foster peers (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction 5). Foster youth experience an increased risk of unemployment, homelessness, early parenthood, and involvement with the criminal justice system after exiting foster care when they do not complete high school (Courtney et al. 412). Foster youth are less likely to become self-sufficient, contributing members of society due to these lifelong implications of an incomplete education.

In the 2016 Homeless Needs Assessment (HNA) of 1,050 individuals experiencing homelessness, 2.1% of respondents cited aging out of foster care as the reason that led to the “current episode of homelessness” in Seattle (City of Seattle 1, 20). However, “Over 23% [of respondents] reported a history of foster care which is much greater than the general population” (City of Seattle 4). In HNA focus groups, participants “in the youth and family groups...[cited] the lack of support for youth transitioning out of foster care, combined with previous experiences of instability and abuse in foster care homes, as causes of homelessness for this vulnerable population” (City of Seattle 13). Without support, foster youth struggle to successfully transition out of the system into a stable, independent life.

Organizations like Treehouse aim to combat the inequity and rights violations experienced by foster children through child centered community development initiatives. Treehouse's Graduation Success program provides academic support to foster youth in middle and high school through personalized coaching, goal setting, and student-centered planning (Broderhausen). Through academic support, Treehouse attempts to restore foster youth's future potential and increase the on-time graduation rate of foster youth. This, in turn, decreases the risks cited by Courtney et al. and helps foster youth transition to become socially, emotionally, and cognitively healthy adults. In addition to education support, youth aging out of foster care need practical support so they are able to find housing and live independently. Organizations and programs like Accelerator YMCA provide transition support to youth aging out of the foster care system through transitional housing, life skills and financial literacy workshops, as well as a resource center ("Housing and Transition Planning"). Programs that support the transition to adulthood are essential for many foster youth to thrive.

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) address the direct needs of foster children and youth. In addition to this, policy and structural reform of the foster care system decreases the vulnerabilities that foster children experience. Advocating for systemic change will replace the current system with one that provides children with permanence more quickly. More American churches joining together to advocate for this change will create a more powerful force that can change the system. Meanwhile, more followers of Christ also need to support the immediate needs of foster children through providing stable housing, recruiting and retaining additional foster parents, working within churches to build better support systems for foster parents, and creating more awareness about foster care issues (Ray and Abramo, "4 Fixes"). Another option for Christians who seek to actively express their faith but are unable to directly meet the needs of

foster children is to fund organizations that provide these services. These short-term solutions assist the current generation of foster children, while advocating for systemic change transforms the landscape of foster care for future generations.

Identifying Connections

Christians who develop awareness see the bigger picture and recognize the complexity of foster care. Once this happens, it is easier to identify aspects of the issue that connect with their existing lives and passions. For example, after learning about the adversity that foster youth face, I chose to volunteer with Treehouse to mitigate one factor: high school completion. The multifaceted nature of the system helps Christians who seek to live a faith more resonant with biblical themes connect their areas of interest with issues they can advocate for such as: family homelessness, incarceration, teen pregnancy, and education. Awareness causes followers of Christ to view the world through a different lens, and allows them to see the less obvious connections between foster care and their other passions.

Christians who know more about foster care also identify connections between the values they hold and the issues foster children face. For example, many followers of Christ believe in the value of hospitality because of the passage in Matthew 25:35: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.” Rosati and Rosati write about their experience of adopting from foster care. It was difficult for their family to adjust when their third son came to live with them, and they felt there was a stranger among them (96). When they read this passage during that time period, Rosati and Rosati “were greatly encouraged” (97) because it reminded them of the way they tangibly served Jesus. Like their son, children impacted by foster care often require loving,

stable foster homes. Christians who seek a life that reflects their faith connect the value of hospitality with foster care by providing for this need.

Empathy and Action

Personal relationships with foster and adoptive families develop empathy and help people move from cognitive awareness – knowing the facts and statistics about foster care – to a personal response. One of the most significant factors in the decision to become foster or adoptive parents is personal knowledge of foster and adoptive families (Helm et al. 120; Tyebjee 700). As a result, foster care is no longer an unfamiliar issue that affects unknown children.

People develop awareness about issues through exposure to information and experiencing what Todd and Rufa call “critical incidents” that develop empathy (328). Christians become more aware of potential avenues for action by learning about the inequality and challenges that foster children face. Education helps followers of Christ conceptualize injustice within the framework of their spiritual values (Todd and Rufa 316). When applied to the issue of foster care, the Christian framework includes values such as caring for orphans, loving others, and hospitality. Education provides information that can elicit empathy. Meeting a foster child humanizes this information which further develops empathy and sparks action.

Interacting with foster children also helps Christians who seek a life that reflects their faith recognize why they need to take action. When this is not feasible, media and illustrations can offer initial exposure that humanizes foster children. Media helps people understand that foster children are real kids. It moves people from viewing foster care as an abstract concept to realizing that it affects real humans in their community. At the “Awake Snohomish County” breakfast event on September 20, 2016, church leaders and members gathered to talk about increasing church involvement in foster care in Snohomish County, WA. As I entered the church

at the event, I saw many pairs of children's shoes lining the foyer and leading up the stairs to the room in which we had breakfast. I was curious about why so many children's shoes were there. During the breakfast, one of the speakers mentioned the reason for the shoes: each pair represented one child who had entered foster care in Snohomish County between January and June of that year, totaling 216 children (Ruiz). This simple, yet powerful, visual demonstration helped me better understand the magnitude of the number of children impacted by foster care. It transformed the statistic – 216 children – into a tangible quantity. Goodman found that “Emotional reactions may be the most important influence” on whether people take action or not, and that the type of action taken is a more cognitive process (1071). Using illustrations like this to develop empathy and appeal to people's emotions is a powerful way to compel people towards action that impacts real, vulnerable children who are in need – children who each have a story, are hurt, and desperately want to belong to a family.

Taking Action

When the Christian community understands how faith intersects with orphan care, and develops knowledge about the issues, it compels them to take action. However, Todd and Rufa found that awareness alone does not always lead to action (328). This is especially true when issues seem too large to comprehend or influence. Humanizing an issue, combined with direction and specific opportunities for involvement counteracts this paralysis in the face of overwhelming issues. It is overwhelming to think about the fact that there are so many children in the foster care system in Washington. Paralysis is not uncommon when an issue seems too large for one individual to make a difference. Awareness must coincide “with self-efficacy to create change in order for awareness to translate into action” (Todd and Rufa 328). Therefore, presenting a

specific opportunity to positively impact the life of a foster child, such as participating in a Christmas gift drive, provides a medium for translating awareness into action.

Taking social action is cyclical in nature. When presented with a new opportunity to volunteer, each Christian goes through three steps – examine, educate, and engage – to take action (see figure 1). Examine includes reflecting on one’s personal schemas about orphans, faith, and values. Followers of Christ who seek a life that reflects their faith examine how they define orphans, how their faith and values connect with orphan care, and what they already know about orphan care. The second step, educate, involves learning about the issue so that Christians who move toward a life of service and worship identify connections with their life and potential areas of action. Third, engage involves Christians taking action to address the needs they identify in the examine and educate phases.

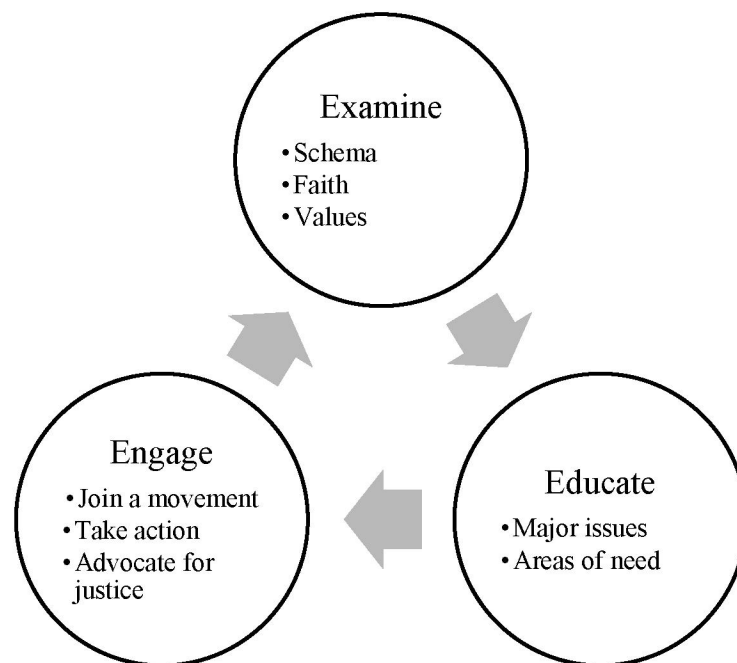


Figure 1. The Action Cycle

The process then begins anew: after taking action, followers of Christ reflect on how effective their action was, how it aligns with their beliefs and values, and whether any of these have

changed. Then they must recognize any knowledge gaps and learn about additional aspects of the issue or identify new areas to take action. Next, Christians who commit to a life that resonates with the gospel once again take action or continue to act in the original avenue of action. The action cycle allows Christians to pause and evaluate how they feel about the issue or action they take, and adjust as needed so they continue to feel effective and engaged in the issue. This action cycle is useful for any aspect of orphan care, as well as any social justice issue in which followers of Christ want to take action based on their beliefs and values.

Existing stakeholders and church leaders can facilitate the action cycle to get others involved. Christians create a support network through attending church and participating in other activities together, and “people are often recruited through their social network to volunteer” (Boezeman and Ellemers 1024). Direction from existing volunteers, such as an invitation to volunteer from another Christian from church, “a relative, friend, or a colleague who is already a volunteer” (Boezeman and Ellemers 1024), helps followers of Christ discover a passion for orphan care and find opportunities to engage. When stakeholders present opportunities for other members of the Christian community to examine, educate, and engage regarding orphan care, it identifies people who want to make a difference in the lives of foster children. Taking action requires Christians to “move along the continuum from predisposed... [to supporting foster care] to [an] engaged supporter” (Joyaux 223). This is a typical volunteer and donor recruitment continuum, and stakeholders and organizations need to effectively communicate the needs that are present in their community that volunteer efforts can address. Although it is the responsibility of stakeholders to communicate the need, individual followers of Christ must make the decision to examine their faith, educate themselves, and engage in action.

There are many ways for Christians who seek a life that reflects their faith to take action. First, by framing local orphan care as a social justice issue, Christian communities identify the need for collective action. Second, systemic level advocacy works to change a system that traumatizes the children it tries to help. Third, preventive efforts increase family support and decrease the number of children who enter foster care. Fourth, when children impacted by foster care and their families become part of a faith community, it is a protective factor that decreases risky behavior and contributes to successful reunification. Fifth, churches establish themselves as a safe space for foster and adoptive families to raise their children when they promote child protection. In turn, church support of outreach programs strengthens families in the community. Sixth, Christian adoption support enables families who adopt children to thrive and takes a holistic approach to support that includes spiritual discipleship. Finally, caring for children's immediate psychosocial needs through mentoring foster and adoptive children nurtures resilience and provides stability in their lives throughout the many transitions they experience in foster care.

Social Justice Action

Engaging in social justice is an expression of faith, a way that the Christian community shares God's love with people whom the rest of society marginalizes. Social justice in orphan care advocates for dignity, inclusion, and hope in the lives of foster children. God's presence is evident in the world when Christians prioritize love over hatred, and reconciliation and reunification over division (Vorster 3). Love and hope form the foundation of seeking justice in the lives of foster children. Churches need to "make structural commitments to increase justice participation... [and provide opportunities] for diverse individuals to interact and expand justice

knowledge and action” (Todd and Rufa 329). When churches include social justice issues as part of their teaching, they reveal the possibility of Christians taking action.

The Christian community promotes social action by first becoming a community of love, fairness, and sound morality (Vorster 5). Practicing these principles within churches equips followers of Christ to apply them to other areas of their lives. It is imperative that the Christian belief system “affect[s] our actions, goals, and perception” of the world (Kelley and Kelley 9). Love, fairness, and sound morality are important principles that develop an attitude of social justice. When the Christian community combines these principles with awareness of injustice it results in social action. Todd and Rufa agree, and found that social justice is “a multifaceted developmental process where individuals moved from unawareness of injustice to knowledge about oppression and injustice to sustained social justice action” (316). Christians cannot advocate for problems they do not know exist. According to Goodman, people “are more likely to act to restore justice when there is a clear injustice and when there is a particular set of actions that could correct the injustice. Therefore, it is important that people have specific ideas of how to act that they feel will make a difference” (1071). In addition to knowing how to act, “Individuals who come to believe that they can effect change are more likely to accomplish what they set out to do” (Kelley and Kelley 9). Likewise, without an attitude of love, a sense of fairness, and a moral conscience, followers of Christ cannot identify injustices in the foster care system.

The social justice issues present in the foster care system are complex and require a multi-faceted approach. Systemic reform of foster care is not possible without “cross-sector coalitions” (Kania and Kramer 39) that work together to address both the causes of foster care placements, and the repercussions children face from growing up within the system. These

coalitions need to take a collective impact approach to the social justice issues that both contribute to and result from the foster care system.

Collective impact initiatives have the capacity to address complex, adaptive problems like the foster care system, in which the solution “is not known, and even if it were, no single entity has the resources to bring about the necessary change” (Kania and Kramer 39). For collective impact to work, existing stakeholders who interact with the system at multiple levels, such as foster children and parents, biological parents and families, social workers, counsellors and support service providers, lawyers, and judges, must participate in creating the solution (Kania and Kramer 39). Collective impact “requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives” (Kania and Kramer 39). In this case, the objective is reducing injustice within the foster care system.

Because of the scope of change required to create a better foster care system, people from many different sectors and organizations need to participate in the collective impact initiative. This includes churches and Christian organizations who want to make a difference in the lives of foster children. It also includes partnering with the government. Collective impact requires society to work together, as a whole, to create social change. As Christian Alliance for Orphans puts it: “For the church to bring light and hope to the foster care system, it is essential that [the church] creates relationships with those who are knowledgeable and passionate about child welfare” (“Church & State Partnerships in Foster Care” 2), including NGOs and government agencies. Through working together with all stakeholders, the Christian community will make a difference in the lives of foster children and promote a more just system in which children thrive.

Advocacy and Social Action

Christians who seek to embody the gospel must advocate for orphans and vulnerable children as an expression of the biblical mandates to love their neighbors and care for orphans. Advocating for orphans and vulnerable children is an expression of neighbor love that “is a matter of action, not of emotion alone ... [and is driven by the] perception that the neighbor bears infinite worth and is irrevocably beloved by God” (Moe-Lobeda 169). That is, God loves all people, and they all bear His image. The Christian community’s advocacy for foster children acknowledges this truth. Followers of Christ who advocate for the needs of foster children and pursue a more just system honor God’s desire for them to help orphans and love people. This advocacy should take place at different levels of society, ranging from the individual needs of foster children to systemic change.

As discussed earlier, children in foster care are more commonly from low income families. Poverty has lifelong effects on children, and when children experience “the overlapping deprivations of poverty and discrimination” (Global Coalition Against Child Poverty 3) that affect vulnerable groups such as foster children, they face more devastating consequences. These consequences include: inadequate health care, “education, nutrition, care, and protection” (Global Coalition Against Child Poverty 3). When the Christian community fails to acknowledge the image of God in foster children and does not advocate for their well-being, it perpetuates the cycle of oppression in their lives.

There are significant costs to society when people fail to protect and advocate for vulnerable children because of the lifelong implications of the trauma these children experience. Called to care for orphans and love their neighbors, the Christian community must advocate for the well-being of foster children by taking action to meet their needs and promoting foster care

system reform. Although the system needs to change, Christians cannot ignore the immediate needs of foster children while working for structural change. Advocating for the individual well-being of children is an important part of changing the system, and acknowledges foster children as precious to God. Advocacy also includes civil action that promotes change at a structural level.

Civil action reflects God's desire for justice by advocating for the kingdom of God on earth, which includes loving "fellow human beings, reconciliation, justice, transformation of the discriminatory society, upliftment of the poor and destitute, hope and peace" (Vorster 3). These values that represent God's kingdom provide a unique opportunity for Christians involved in civil action, which is sharing the gospel through acting out God's mission. To engage in civil action, followers of Christ must recognize their social position in the world, understand social justice, and identify the social structures that need to change.

First, Christians who seek to express their faith through advocacy must know their social position. This is essential to engaging in civil action because people in positions of privilege interact with the world differently than those who are not privileged. Privileged people can be blind to the existence of injustice, and fail to see the negative repercussions of their actions and their participation in unjust systems (Moe-Lobeda 84). Privileged communities need to become aware of injustice through "exposure to injustice [that] increase[s] empathy, [and] education about inequality to enable people to connect injustice to their moral and spiritual values" (Todd and Rufa 316). Once Christians recognize their privilege and learn about inequality, they can respond with compassionate civil action. Compassion is "downward movement toward solidarity instead of an upward movement toward popularity" (Schut 62) and privilege. Followers of Christ embody "God's compassionate heart" (Schut 65) when they reach out to the underprivileged

people in their lives. In the context of this paper, that includes youth and children in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care.

Second, when Christian communities determine their social position, they can move beyond their identities as privileged people to become social justice allies through “education, critical consciousness, and navigating privilege” (Todd and Rufa 317). Churches cannot become social justice allies if they are not aware there is a problem. Education develops awareness of justice issues like the foster care system. Once aware, followers of Christ who seek to embody gospel themes cannot be idle and watch while the injustice continues. They must seek justice. The biblical concept of justice is not about punishment; it focuses on restoration and the healing of broken relationships (Clawson 22). Christians need to seek this type of justice in the foster care system. Churches model biblical justice when they engage in civil action to restore both the victims and perpetrators of injustice to right relationship with each other and with God. In the context of foster care, biblical justice includes advocating for biological parents to establish or restore a relationship with God. Although seeking justice should not focus on converting people to Christianity, a relationship with God can lead to spiritual, behavioral, and lifestyle changes that make reunification possible (Lietz and Hodge 385). This brings additional restoration and justice in the parent-child relationship.

Third, to address civil action at the systemic level, the Christian community must identify structures that need to change, as well as the underlying causes of issues. Then churches can choose an avenue to engage in civil action for social justice. God calls followers of Christ “to see the social structural roots [of social issues like poverty and foster care] and to engage actively in advocacy for systemic change” (Moe-Lobeda 125). Seeing structural problems requires additional efforts to challenge and change “individual attitudes to blame systems rather than

individuals for inequality” (Todd and Rufa 321). For the Christian community to recognize the structural roots of issues, advocates first need to challenge the dominant, individualistic schema through which Americans view the world (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 95). A systemic viewpoint recognizes that the interaction of the criminal justice system, welfare system, and child welfare system that resulted in an increase in children placed into foster care between 1985 and 1999 reveals the structural nature of this social justice issue. A structural approach focuses “social justice efforts on political, legal and other structural solutions to create just structures ... [using strategies that include] grassroots community organizing, political and policy advocacy, and citizen participation” (Todd and Rufa 321). Christians participating in civil action for structural change employ these strategies by volunteering in their community, writing letters to their state representatives or senators, participating in advocacy marches, and voting on legislative bills that reform the foster care system.

Preventive Efforts

Preventing children from entering foster care is one avenue of action that reduces the burden on the system. Decreasing the number of children in the system also reduces the number of children who experience trauma in foster care. Three primary ways to stop children from entering foster care are food security measures, family housing initiatives, and Safe Families programs. The Christian community can take action to support existing organizations that work in these areas, as well as establish supportive measures within their churches that strengthen families.

In 2015, 6.4 million children lived in food insecure households, and 541,000 children “lived in households with very low food security” (Coleman-Jensen et al. 6, 9). Food insecurity is often a symptom of economic insecurity. Economic instability can cause domestic violence,

which leads to children entering foster care (Chilton et al. 81; The AFCARS Report 2). Food insecurity is insufficient access to enough food for an active and healthy life because of economic circumstances (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2). When families have very low food security, which includes one or more family members reducing food intake or having disrupted eating patterns due to a lack of money and other resources for food (Coleman-Jensen et al. 4), tensions run higher in the home and there is an increased risk of domestic violence (Chilton et al. 81). Churches can decrease the risk of violence by working with low income families to increase their food security.

Government subsidy programs provide some economic support for families; however, these may not guarantee food security in all families. In their study of female-headed households, Chilton et al. found that of the women they interviewed, 50% who received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), 97% who were part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and 78% who participated in Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), reported low or very low food security, despite receiving government subsidies from TANF, SNAP, and/or WIC (76). Community level interventions that address food security should improve families' access to food and refer them to resources such as state and federal nutrition assistance programs (Chilton et al. 81). In addition, NGOs must fill the gaps when these programs do not fully meet a family's needs. Church pantries or food bank referrals are starting points for the Christian community to support low income families' access to food. Churches need to become aware of the resources available in their communities so that when they interact with families who experience food insecurity, they can provide assistance or refer them to the appropriate local organizations.

Family housing initiatives and family shelters support the housing needs of low income families. The Christian community should partner with or volunteer at organizations that help families transition from homelessness to having a home. When parents struggle to provide shelter for their children, instability occurs, and if prolonged, this can lead to the children entering foster care. During 2015, 10% of children who entered foster care in the United States did so due to “inadequate housing” (The AFCARS Report 2). Along with supporting affordable housing initiatives, churches can use their benevolent offering funds to assist families in need when they experience temporary unemployment or unexpected expenses, such as health care bills that inhibit their ability to pay rent. Family-focused shelters provide families with emergency accommodations and connect families with affordable housing. Mary’s Place is a family shelter located in Seattle that “empowers and equips families with the tools to find stable housing” (“Common Questions”). When churches partner with organizations such as Mary’s Place, they empower families to care for their children and contribute to a more stable environment that keeps children out of foster care.

Homes become unstable when parents experience a crisis such as drug addiction, temporary homelessness, incarceration, or unemployment. Safe Families programs offer the opportunity for struggling families to temporarily place their children with stable families independent of the foster care system. In the Greater Seattle area, Olive Crest’s Safe Families program works in partnership with churches and Christian families to provide a temporary, stable environment for at-risk children whose families are in crisis (“Safe Families”). Programs like this offer help for families in crisis before their situation declines to a point where DSHS intervenes. The Christian community supports families by providing a trusted environment for parents to place their children in while they work to regain stability.

Preventive programs are critical to helping at-risk families care for their children through addressing “some of the underlying causes of parental or caregiver stress” (Faith to Action Initiative 7). Building the capacity of the community to care for and protect children is a key area where churches can work to strengthen the child protection system (Forbes et al. 6). Supporting families and preventing “unnecessary separation” eases the burden on the formal child protection system and keeps families together (Faith to Action Initiative 8). To support families, Overlake Christian Church (OCC) in Redmond, WA developed services and partnerships that focus on addiction recovery, supporting women through unplanned pregnancies, and providing a safe family for children whose families are in crisis (Schneidler). Their pastor of local orphan care, Michele Schneidler, coordinates opportunities for engagement and directs volunteers to areas of need (Schneidler). Equipping families to care for their children reduces the potential for abuse and neglect, which prevents the removal of children from their homes and improves the capacity of the community to protect children.

Faith is a Protective Factor

Faith is a protective factor in orphan care. Faith can facilitate transformation in the biological family that leads to successful reunification. What I refer to as faith includes both spirituality and religious expression. Spirituality is an individual’s relationship with God, and religious expression is evidence of that spiritual relationship (Lietz and Hodge 381). In their study of successful reunification, Lietz and Hodge found that faith influenced families in three ways: prayer, beliefs leading to behavioral change, and social support through faith communities (384). Prayer is a coping mechanism when life becomes stressful, and when recovering from addiction (Lietz and Hodge 385). Faith’s influence on core beliefs facilitates behavioral change that stabilizes parents struggling with addiction and leads to following case plans to reunification

(Lietz and Hodge 386). Faith communities provide practical and emotional support, which help families cope with life changes (Lietz and Hodge 386). The evidence found by Lietz and Hodge highlights opportunities for faith communities to engage more with families at risk of entering the system, or who are trying to regain custody of their children.

Many older youth in foster care have experienced significant disruptions to their lives, and have few positive resources to draw on when experiencing adversity. Scott et al. found that religious involvement can lead to lower levels of risky behaviors in these youth (230). Encouraging foster children and youth to engage in the faith community provides a foundation of positive beliefs and values that can improve their coping skills. Religious involvement can be a reparative resource and developmental asset that provides resilience and helps youth cope with adversity (Scott et al. 235). Scott et al. found an association between regular attendance of a faith community and decreased sexual behavior, cigarette use, and marijuana use in foster youth who were 16-17 years old (230). The results of this study indicate that followers of Christ who seek to positively impact the lives of foster children and youth can encourage their participation in the faith community. Nurturing the faith of foster children and youth is one way to help them cope with their experiences and make positive life choices. Not only is faith a factor that contributes to the Christian community engaging in orphan care, but sharing the gospel can also decrease the number of children and families who are part of the foster care system.

Promoting Child Protection in Churches

Stakeholders also need to lead a culture shift within churches to become more foster care friendly. The simplest way to start involving people in ministry to foster children: make churches a safe space for foster and adoptive families. A safe space means these families are comfortable dropping their kids off and immersing themselves in the church community. For example,

“Carly” emphasizes that the structure of children’s ministries is not always helpful for ministering to children with different needs. In her experience, “basic education and preparation” for ministering to foster children and their families is lacking in many churches (“Carly”).

Restructuring children’s ministry in a way that supports foster and adoptive families who are within the congregation is an easy first step for churches to take toward supporting foster care.

Normalizing a culture of orphan care and child protection in churches supports families within the church who foster or adopt children, and has the potential to reach out to the surrounding community by providing a safe space for families to gather. “Jasmine,” a mother of two children adopted from foster care, believes that “churches should be advocates for foster kids” and that this not only involves supporting foster families, but also includes showing love to families who reunify with their children, and supporting marginalized families before they reach a crisis point. When churches build up families in the community through outreach and are present in the community as family-friendly organizations, they enhance the informal social safety net and engage in child protection.

In addition to the preventive work that Overlake Christian Church does, OCC believes it is important to support foster care, which they view as a temporary arrangement “while the state works to find permanent solutions such as adoption, relative care, or reunification with birth parents” (Overlake Christian Church). Children and families require support throughout this time of transition. OCC does outreach work in this area that focuses on partnering with a local DSHS office. Christian volunteers engage in two main activities in partnership with the DSHS office: packing backpacks to give to children who come into state care with nothing, and becoming “office moms or dads,” who stay with children in the DSHS office while a social worker finds the child a foster home (Schneidler). These two initiatives improve the service delivery

mechanism that provides protection for children (Forbes et al. 5). When churches partner with the state DSHS offices, it can ease their burden and support their staff, which improves the quality of child protection services the state offers.

Adoption Support

Supporting adoptive families begins with pre-adoption preparation (Barth and Miller 449). Because adoption from foster care requires families to become foster parents prior to adoption finalization, families need to have adequate resources and training to care for the children placed in their home. Pre-adoption preparation should offer a variety of resources to families, including “counseling, reading materials, information about the child’s psychosocial history, psychological testing, and interaction with other adoptive parents” (Wind et al. 379). Factors to consider when matching foster children with families include the family’s perception of foster children, educational experience, specific training, and cultural worldview (Brown et al. 25, 26). Brown et al. found that there were seven common values, beliefs and traditions among successful foster parents: spirituality, a strong sense of nationality, religion, the effect of personal experiences on caregiving practices, as well as the values of responsibility, right and wrong, and respect (31-33). Christians who seek to actively express their faith hold many of these values, and can encourage foster families to develop them through supporting foster parent training and discipleship.

Children adopted from foster care often require therapeutic parenting because of the abuse, neglect, and rejection they experienced in their biological family (Luckock and Hart 127). Adopted children are at increased risk of developmental, mental, behavioral, and social problems than non-adopted children (Ward 175). As a result, many adoptive families require special support services that help parents care for their adopted children (Luckock and Hart 129; Wind et

al. 380). Using data from the U.S. National Survey of Adoptive Parents, Ward found that 70% of adopted children used post-adoption support services (183). Professional adoption support includes: support groups, education, financial support, and counseling support (Luckock and Hart 129; Wind et al. 380). The primary categories of post-adoption support are educational, clinical, and material support (Barth and Miller 450). Access to a variety of support services helps adoptive families succeed, thus providing children from foster care with permanence. Christian organizations such as Bethany Christian Services, Antioch Adoptions and Olive Crest offer professional support from a biblical worldview for foster and adoptive families. Providing services to foster and adoptive families that support their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs offers a more holistic approach to support than state-run services that do not address spiritual needs.

Mentorship

It is often challenging to work with children impacted by foster care. Many children from foster care have experienced the trauma of “deprivation, abuse and neglect”, including “lack of food, shelter and medical care” (Miles and Wright 118). Experiencing situations of deprivation, abuse, and neglect put children’s well-being and development at risk, “to the extent that their life-chances, emotional progress and sense of self-worth and identity are all under threat” (Miles and Wright 117). This can lead to impaired “emotional, physical and psychological development... [and interrupt] preparation for adult roles and tasks” (Miles and Wright 117). If followers of Christ want to transform the lives of children impacted by foster care, they need to be a witness to these children’s stories by being “there with them, *hearing* them, *believing* them, *honoring* them, [and] being Christ to them” (Miles and Wright 119, emphasis original). One way to witness their stories is mentorship.

Mentors and mentees form a unique relationship that provides some stability for a foster child or youth. Mentorship can either be formal, through a program, or informal, through the family's support networks. Children and youth who move to multiple foster care placements find a safe place and a sense of grounding by forming a relationship with a mentor. Mentors are a consistent adult figure in the lives of these children amidst the upheaval they experience with their biological or foster families. Munson and McMillen emphasize the importance of the mentoring relationship for children and youth impacted by foster care, and believe developing an emotional connection between the mentor and mentee is critical to an effective mentoring relationship (454). They also found that most foster youth "are in high need of supportive adults in their lives" (Munson and McMillen 464). With a consistent mentoring relationship, foster children and youth feel secure and cultivate resilience, which ultimately makes a positive impact on their lives.

Likewise, when experienced foster parents mentor new foster parents, they offer emotional support and expertise that encourages the new foster parents and helps them thrive. When foster parents feel supported, they are less likely to leave the system. After experiencing a difficult period of time in their foster and adoptive parenting journey, Rosati and Rosati wanted to give up, but they persevered and now "feel strongly that folks going through the same thing need to reach out and talk to others, seek professional help, or join a support group" (99) because foster families who struggle need to know they are not alone. In addition, through participating in support groups or mentoring relationships, less experienced foster parents learn coping and parenting strategies from more experienced foster parents that help them succeed.

Practical Implications

After Christians go through the process of redefining their concept of orphans and orphan care, examining how faith relates to orphan care, becoming aware of the challenges present in American foster care, and beginning to take action, they need further opportunities to examine, educate, and engage in action. That is, the action cycle repeats itself (see figure 1). The problems in the foster care system are overwhelming. As a result, stakeholders need to break it down into action steps or opportunities that new volunteers see as realistic and doable. There are four main categories in which the Christian community has the capacity to take action: tangible, psychosocial, and financial needs, as well as advocacy.

Tangible Needs

Foster and adoptive children and families have many physical needs. Like all families, they require food, clothing, and shelter. Churches can help families meet these tangible needs as part of local orphan care initiatives. For example, The City Church Kirkland Campus established the Rose Hill Cottages, “a community of 22 single family residences... whose purpose is to provide affordable housing to families who are providing foster care” (“Rose Hill Cottages”). This meets the need in Kirkland for affordable housing for foster families, and creates a unique atmosphere where foster families, as neighbors, support each other. Not every church has the capacity to create a community like this, but many churches can assist with tangible needs such as affordable housing through their connections with other organizations and through members of their Christian community.

Some churches provide meals for foster families when they have a new child placed with them, akin to the common tradition of providing meals for families with newborn babies. Foster families experience a similar amount of chaos and upheaval in the transition of a new foster

placement as families who bring home new children through birth. One of the adoptive mothers I interviewed, “Tiffany,” and her husband brought their daughter home when she was two days old, but they felt unsupported by their church family. Of those first few weeks, “Tiffany” recalls: “it can be a very lonely and isolating time because when you’re pregnant you get baby showers and people come around you and it’s obvious that you’re going to have a baby. When you’re fostering or adopting, people don’t realize [what your needs are].” “Tiffany” suggests this difference in approach is due to the lack of awareness around what foster and adoptive families experience when they bring a new child into their home. Including foster and adoptive families in meal ministries is a simple way for churches to normalize these family experiences and support their transition.

“Carly” also stressed the importance of meeting “felt needs” for foster and adoptive families. She believes that “providing meals and basic initial needs is a huge resource that should be something that the church is ready and equipped to engage in” (“Carly”). Their family felt very supported by the church community when they delivered clothing, diapers, and bottles to “Carly’s” house after they brought a newborn home on very short notice (“Carly”). Similarly, in one of my previous churches a single mother adopted two children from foster care. In response, the church hosted an “adoption shower” for her, even though the children were toddlers. This shower showed the love and support of the church community in “Emily’s” life, and met several needs for her children. Meeting the tangible needs of foster and adoptive families, whether through providing a special housing community, bringing families meals after new placements, or giving them a shower of gifts, includes them in the church community, and supports them in a way that acknowledges their unique family experience.

Psychosocial Needs

All churches have the capacity to create a community of support around families, through either formal ministries, or by partnering with existing organizations like Fostering Together. Overlake Christian Church hosts the Refresh support group for foster and adoptive families once a month as a way of supporting the psychosocial needs of these families in their community (“Orphan Care Handbook”). If a formal ministry like the Refresh support group is not feasible for a church, they can provide space for external support groups to meet instead. Fostering Together is an organization that “strive[s] to increase the number of foster families...help families with the licensing process, and provide ongoing support to ensure their success” (“About Us”). Churches can provide the space for Fostering Together support groups to meet as a service to the foster and adoptive community.

Christian foster families need both spiritual and emotional support to successfully navigate the challenges of parenting children in and from foster care. Support networks can be informal, consisting of family and friends, or formal, such as a peer support group. “Carly’s” support network includes close family friends who meet as a community group. She values the support her family receives from this community and believes it is integral to her and her husband’s capacity to successfully parent foster children (“Carly”). “Tiffany” found that attending her local “MOPS” (Mothers of Preschoolers) peer support group with her adopted daughter was a significant source of support, and described it as being “good for [her] to talk to other moms to try to figure out what they’re doing, and what [she’s] doing” as they navigate motherhood and learn how to parent preschoolers together. Foster and adoptive families have a unique parenting journey because of the challenges their children face, but they also share many experiences with families formed through birth. As a result, foster and adoptive families benefit

from two types of psychosocial support: from their fellow foster and adoptive parents, and from biological parents.

Supporting the psychosocial needs of foster and adoptive families enables them to continue providing permanence for their children. Permanence is an important aspect of the child protection system, and can involve long-term foster care, permanent guardianship, or adoption. Permanence provides a loving family for a child, which gives the child a sense of belonging and “a lifelong connection to a community of people” (Faith to Action Initiative 7). Families are vital to children’s healthy development, and can facilitate healing for traumatized children through providing “a secure, nurturing environment that is consistent with [their] social and cultural values” (Miles and Wright 134). When Christian families live out the gospel and provide permanence, or support the families who do so, it strengthens the child protection system and addresses the needs of children who are unable to return to their biological families.

Overlake Christian Church organizes the yearly Refresh conference for foster and adoptive parents to support families who provide permanence for children (Schneider). Refresh is a faith-based conference which hosts breakout sessions and workshops designed to equip foster and adoptive parents with tools to succeed. The theme of the conference in 2016, “me too,” aimed to create connections in the stories of foster and adoptive parents. I attended this conference as part of my field research. It was a powerful experience that provided me with a glimpse into the life and culture of foster and adoptive families. Through interacting with parents at the conference, it became clear that meaningful connection and peer support are essential to the success of foster and adoptive parenting. It is not an easy task to parent children impacted by foster care, and connecting with both formal and informal support networks is an important part of successful parenting.

Financial Needs

Followers of Christ who seek a life that reflects their faith but do not have the capacity or desire to directly care for children impacted by foster care can use their financial resources to help children in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care. Relieving some of the financial burdens associated with raising children can ease tension in low income families, and support families who choose to care for children in or from foster care. There are several ways to support the financial needs of children and families impacted by foster care, including financing adoptions, covering the cost of legal support, helping with the financial needs of foster families, and funding non-profit organizations that focus on meeting the needs of low income families.

Finances should not be a barrier to adopting children from foster care. Some adoption organizations, such as Antioch Adoptions in Redmond, provide low-cost or free adoption services to families adopting from foster care (Loveless). Organizations like Antioch Adoptions raise funds to cover the costs associated with foster care adoptions. The Christian community can support children from foster care and make adoption more accessible to families through donating to organizations like Antioch Adoptions. If families use other organizations that have a fee-for-service structure, Christians can contribute toward the cost instead. For families who want to adopt children from foster care but are unable to finance the process, which costs up to several thousand dollars, the Christian community can raise adoption funds through church, family, and friend support networks.

When a child in foster care is unable to return to the custody of his or her birth parents, kinship placements are often the first option that DSHS explores. In some cases, an extended family member wants to adopt a child or children from foster care but cannot afford the legal costs associated with the adoption process (Schneidler). This is where organizations such as the

Children's Law Center of Washington (CLCW) step in to assist families through providing low-cost legal services ("About Us"). According to Schneider, whose husband founded CLCW, non-profit legal work is essential to providing permanence for foster children. Children in kinship care "have the important advantage that their placements last longer. These placements therefore make a major contribution to stability for children who cannot live with their parents" (Farmer 340). The Christian community can keep extended families together through donating to, or partnering with, organizations such as CLCW who work to make kinship adoptions affordable for lower income families.

Food and economic security help prevent foster care placement. Improving food security and economic stability reduces intimate partner violence and child maltreatment (World Health Organization 8). Christians who live out their faith strengthen the mission of organizations that support marginalized and at-risk families, such as food banks and low-cost housing initiatives, through donating financial resources and volunteering. Churches also directly help with the financial needs of families through establishing support services such as internal food and clothing banks, as well as free meals. One such service is the Bothell Community Kitchen, which offers a free community meal on Sunday evenings at Bothell United Methodist Church ("Mission and Service"). Christian communities who want to assist low income families can partner with successful organizations or church ministries to augment existing opportunities instead of establishing new, redundant community services. Strengthening the services that already exist is a more effective way of reaching the population, unless there is an actual service gap, in which case churches can identify ways to reduce this gap.

Christians who choose to serve through tithing care for the financial needs of children impacted by foster care and their families by funding the work of NGOs that serve this

population. Through sharing their extra financial resources, Christian communities back the efforts of non-profits. This enables organizations to take action and support families in need. Donating funds to sustain the work of non-profits allows followers of Christ to invest themselves in the cause, “through the resources that God has given [them]” (Nouwen 17), including financial resources. Christians who financially support organizations fill a critical need in local orphan care by enabling organizations who serve vulnerable populations to continue operating.

Advocacy

Through advocacy, the Christian community improves the capacity of the current system to serve children impacted by foster care. Christians can volunteer as a court appointed special advocate (CASA) to advocate for a foster child’s best interests while they navigate the foster care and legal system. Washington State CASA is an organization that trains and supports volunteer CASAs, and works to “raise public awareness of child welfare issues” (WaCASA). CASAs ensure children do not get lost in the system of social workers, biological families, and legal representatives. They also give children a voice in the decisions that determine the trajectory of their lives. CASAs listen to the child or children they advocate for, and ensure children are safe and experience the least amount of instability possible.

Becoming a CASA is a significant commitment. Less time-intensive ways the Christian community advocates include: supporting legislation that affects foster children, marching in demonstrations, as well as participating in advocacy days. An example of this is the annual Youth Advocacy Day in Olympia that addresses the issues of foster care and youth homelessness in Washington State. Merida and Morton point out that in “recent history, the evangelical church has shown the ability to be a political juggernaut” (105), which underlines how important it is for Christians to take political action to help vulnerable children.

Christian communities can also raise awareness when new legislation considers the needs of foster children or youth. For example, the 2017 Bill HB 1808, if passed, will establish “support for foster youth in obtaining drivers’ licenses and automobile liability insurance” (“HB 1808 - 2017-18”). Increasing the Christian community’s support of legislation through raising awareness, writing letters to state representatives, and marching in demonstrations, helps the government understand the extent of public support for proposed legislation, and in some cases, the need for existing laws to change.

Christians who seek a life that reflects their faith can also volunteer at march events such as Youth Advocacy Day. The Mockingbird Society organizes it, but welcomes volunteers and representatives from other local organizations who work with vulnerable youth and children such as Treehouse, Youth Care, and United Way of King County (“2017 Youth Advocacy Day”). When the Christian community volunteers with organizations who advocate for the well-being of youth, it adds momentum to the movement that seeks to improve the lives of children and youth impacted by foster care.

Sustaining Action

Members of the Christian community who go through the transformative process of the action cycle (see figure 1) also need support to maintain their action. Couples who adopt children from foster care need continued support as they grow and develop as adoptive families. Snyder identifies several reasons people choose to volunteer, including personal values like humanitarian concern, personal convictions such as religious and spiritual values, as well as “community concern and the desire to help a community” (231). For many followers of Christ, appealing to their faith and Christian values serves as an impetus for engaging in orphan care. Alternatively, some Christians might respond better to an appeal to their concern for children. It

is important for stakeholders to consider the type of volunteer they want to attract, and how Christians in their community will respond to different requests for assistance.

Stakeholders who recruit new volunteers need to design messages that appeal to the volunteers' motivations. Snyder also found that "commitment to sustained service ... [was] greater among volunteers whose experiences were congruent with, or matched, their [initial] motivations for volunteering" (234). Matching the appeal for help with individuals' underlying motivation for action leads to sustained service. When there is dissonance between initial expectations or motivations for volunteering and the lived experience, volunteer retention decreases.

Retention also falters if volunteers do not feel their work makes a difference. Conversely, volunteers achieve self-efficacy by believing they will positively impact the lives of the children with whom they work. This leads them to "set their sights higher, try harder, persevere longer, and show more resilience in the face of failure" (Kelley and Kelley 10). It is when self-efficacy is lacking that foster parents leave the system – when they feel they do not have the tools or support they need to make a difference in the lives of the children they parent. According to Ray and Abramo, foster parents in Washington "aren't given enough training to cope with the increasingly more troubled children entering the system... [for example] when kids need intensive treatment for mental health problems, it's often unavailable or inadequate" ("Abandoning the System"). Foster parents also burn out when their parenting experience is not what they expected. If there is no spiritual or humanitarian motivation for becoming foster parents, or no other incentive to remain a foster family, they leave the system.

A better future, in which all children have loving, permanent homes is possible. Envisioning "what could be" provides hope that Christian communities and secular society can

create this future (Moe-Lobeda 113). Believing that the problems present in the current foster care system are too large and impossible to change “imperils a more just future” (Moe-Lobeda 113). Christians who seek to actively express their faith must develop “critical moral vision” that sees “the power dynamics that determine who has the necessities for life” (Moe-Lobeda 84) and work to uncover the structures that maintain the vulnerability of foster children.

Churches need to engage with foster children and foster care alumni to get to know them and learn from them, “because the magnitude of evil is known most fully by those who experience it, and by their stories that reveal [our] participation in it” (Moe-Lobeda 120). Christian communities empower their members and “have potential to promote norms for social justice...and opportunities for social justice action” (Todd and Rufa 317). Churches need to embrace this potential and “should not bring an alternative story, but should *be* the alternative story to be told” (Vorster 4, emphasis original) about social justice and orphan care. In turn, followers of Christ who seek to live a faith that embodies gospel themes must seize the opportunity to construct a better future for foster children. Christian communities can change the narrative of orphan care to include local orphans – foster children – and provide the stable, loving families in which they grow up.

Real change is possible when families receive the support they need to successfully parent their children. Preventing children from entering foster care precludes the experiences of injustice and oppression often found within the system. When prevention is impossible, providing permanence for children from foster care is the best alternative. From a systemic point of view, adoption from foster care benefits all of society through decreasing the fiscal burden of foster care on the state. More importantly, adoption creates better “outcomes for the child and the community by improving education and reducing problem behaviors” (Hansen and Hansen 562).

Transforming the system begins with small changes, which “can eventually add up to a big impact. Starting small gets you from a state of rest to a state of motion [which builds] momentum for the bigger challenges” (Kelley and Kelley 143) of enduring, systemic change. Starting with small, yet significant, contributions to the well-being of foster children, like providing for some of their tangible needs, overcomes inertia and is the beginning of a journey toward creating a more just future for foster children. Then, through either preventing entry to foster care, fostering, or adopting children from foster care, the Christian community can significantly impact the lives of vulnerable children in the United States. By envisioning a future where all children are cared for within families, and acting to make that a reality, all children will benefit from a stable, loving family.

Conclusion

Christian communities have the power to make a difference in the lives of children in and from foster care. Once they reexamine what the Bible says about who orphans are and how followers of Christ should care for them, Christians who desire to live a faith more resonant with biblical themes must apply it to their lives. More Christian communities can engage in orphan care through understanding why their faith is both a catalyst and sustaining force for action, becoming aware of what issues children impacted by foster care experience, and how they can take action. It is only through the process of understanding why they should care, what to care about, and how to care for orphans that Christians who seek a life that reflects their faith effectively take action.

When the Bible refers to orphans and the fatherless, it describes vulnerable children in the community. The four themes regarding orphans in the Bible teach followers of Christ to defend, provide for, not oppress, and adopt vulnerable children. Children impacted by foster care

are a vulnerable population in the United States, and Christian communities need to apply the concepts of biblical orphan care to determine how to help these children. Additionally, Christians who want to understand how to apply their faith explore the biblical concepts of vertical adoption, neighbor love, and missional living.

To discover how to assist children impacted by foster care, Christian communities need to become more deeply aware of the issues these children face. Through learning about foster care in the United States, specifically Washington State, followers of Christ develop awareness of how the foster care system and adoption process affect children. By developing a relationship with foster and adoptive families, Christians seeking a more active expression of their faith move from knowing about foster care and adoption to knowing children and families who experience the daily impacts of the system. When more Christian communities welcome these families, it nurtures empathy and encourages followers of Christ to identify connections between their existing areas of interest or volunteer efforts and the experiences of children impacted by foster care. These connections serve as a point of entry for Christian communities to take action and make a positive impact on the lives of children in, from, and at risk of entering, foster care.

Christians who currently work with children impacted by foster care can highlight areas of need for new volunteers. These stakeholders encourage other followers of Christ who seek a life that reflects their faith to take action through identifying the unmet needs of local orphans, and outlining the aspects of orphan care that are social justice issues. Advocacy, mentorship, preventive efforts, and promoting child protection in churches are all areas in which Christian communities can volunteer and engage in orphan care. When stakeholders provide other Christians with volunteer opportunities, it encourages them to take action at varying levels of involvement and in varying areas of society.

Christians who want to serve orphans and vulnerable children take action within their churches and communities by seeking to meet the tangible, psychosocial, and financial needs of children and their families impacted by foster care. In addition to meeting these needs, Christian communities have the capacity to advocate for systemic change. The foster care system, in its current form, traumatizes children and their families. Advocating for a better system involves envisioning a different future, one in which children have a voice, are safe, and find permanence quickly. Adding more Christian communities to the movement and developing connections with other organizations creates a more powerful collective force for change in the foster care system.

Christian communities need to reexamine their conceptualization of orphan care, and expand it to include vulnerable children who are in, from, or at risk of entering, foster care. After rethinking this concept, followers of Christ examine their faith and biblical calling to care for orphans, as well as raise awareness and learn what orphan care entails in the context of the United States. Combining why churches should care with a deep awareness of the issues orphans face leads to their desire to engage in action and learn how to care for orphans. Followers of Christ who actively express their faith and already care for orphans can use directed action to encourage others to join in the cause. Through taking collective action and advocacy, the Christian community will make a significant difference in the lives of children impacted by foster care and transform the foster care system in the United States.

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