Northwest University

How Language Affects our Perception of Orphans:

Accurate Language Leads to Informed Action

Presented in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in International Community Development to the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences of Northwest University

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Portions of this paper were previously submitted to the following International Community Development Courses: Leadership; Globalization; Research Methods; Practicum: Fieldwork; Peace and Reconciliation

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Acknowledgements

This thesis has only been possible because of the amazing community that has surrounded me. Thank you, Dr. Forest Inslee and Dr. Autumn Witt, for your leadership and encouragement throughout this journey; you both have greatly impacted this graduate school experience. To Cohort 10, thank you for teaching me the value in my voice, expanding my views, and being a support system I can always lean on. Jesse Nathasson, my thesis buddy, this thesis journey would not happen without having you by my side; you are who I needed in this season and you will always be a part of this journey.

Thank you, Elli, for being a pivotal leader in my learning experience and patiently guiding me through this journey. Thank you, Todd and Beth from Safe Families for Children for showing me what it looks like to reflect Jesus in caring for families. Thank you, Maren, for your mindfulness and gentleness in leading our church in caring for children and families experiencing vulnerabilities.

I have been blessed by a community of friends that have rallied around me and prayed for me. I am thankful for my family, especially my dad (Poppy), for always sending me encouraging text messages, and my sister, Alexis, who not only invested time in my thesis, but has cheered me on the whole way.

Lastly, this thesis would not be possible without my husband, Jonathan, who has stood beside me since the beginning. Jonathan, you have spent countless hours brainstorming ideas with me and editing every single paper. You have believed in my abilities when I did not, held me when I've cried, and pushed me to keep going when I wanted to quit. Thank you for making yourself a safe place for me to process and question what I've learned, and, most of all, for joining me in this transformational experience. We did this together. This is *our* thesis.

Visualization Exercise

Take your time through this exercise, allowing each image to enter into your mind.

Take a moment and visualize an orphanage. Now imagine yourself in an orphanage.

Where are you? Why are you there? Who is there with you?

Remain at this scene. Look around and allow your imagination to guide you.

Now, write down any words that you associate with the word *orphan*.

By placing ourselves in this scene, we begin to engage ourselves in an area we typically feel disconnected from. Writing down the words that we associate with the word orphan allows us to identify our perceptions of what it means to be an orphan.

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2012, I was 20 years old on a mission trip to Nicaragua. I was there for six weeks to visit an orphanage and "love on the orphans." As I listened to these children's stories about their families, confusion grew within me as their words contradicted what I thought I knew. According to my understanding of the word *orphan*[1], I thought these children were without parents or family. My response to the local pastor overseeing the orphanage was, "What do you mean these children aren't orphans? If they aren't orphans, then what are they doing here?"

This story is not uncommon; it is an unfortunate and shocking truth that many people encounter. According to Lumos, an international non-profit that researches the effects of orphanages, more than 80% of children in orphanages are not orphans[2] ("Children in Institutions" 2). The majority of these children have families, yet situational circumstances have caused them to be separated from their families. The very reason that I went to Nicaragua was because I believed that I was going to "love on the orphans." The word *orphan* turned out to be deceptive in this context, as it did not reflect the situation that I thought I was walking into and supporting. The disconnect between compassion-driven action and well-informed action was only the start of my search for answers. What began out of curiosity had turned to frustration due to what I saw as preventable separation, but eventually this gave way to a need for change, not just for me, but also for Evangelical Christians in the United States.

As I have investigated "orphan care," my research and fieldwork this summer led me to settle on the importance of language, specifically the use of the word *orphan*. More broadly, my research found that the language used by Evangelical churches in the United States, specifically

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[1] The word *orphan* will be italicized when it is used as a term.
[2] At least one parent is still alive ("Global Facts About Orphanages" 1).

around "orphan care," influences both domestic (foster care, family preservation) and international (adoption, orphanages) action. The language that we use matters because it affects our perception, which in turn influences and informs our actions. The "orphan care" language used by Evangelical churches unconsciously shapes our thoughts around children experiencing vulnerabilities, and therefore requires accurate terminology to challenge our biases, identify needs, inform our decisions, and implement best practices.

I am directing this paper toward Evangelical churches in the U.S. because this is a community I grew up in, understand, and am still a part of. My intention is not to restrict our language, but to bring awareness to the way the language engrained in Evangelical church culture influences our perceptions and actions. My heart is that we, as Christ-followers, can reflect Christ's heart for humanity with thoughtful words and actions.

Throughout this paper, I will refer to *orphanages* and *institutions* in the international context and *foster care* in the domestic context.[3] I will refer to *experts* as those who work in the field and are knowledgeable about the impact of their efforts. It is important to note that while many professionals are Christians, many Christians are not experts. When I refer to the *Church*, I am referencing the global "body of Christ," while when I refer to *Christians*, I am indicating Evangelicals in the United States.

2. History of Caring for Orphans

In order to understand the impact of our language, we must begin by looking back at how we got to where we are today. Historically, orphans have been cared for by society, in various ways, for centuries. In the early days of the church, "collections were taken during church services to help the orphans" (Schmidt 131). Even more, due to the short life expectancy at the

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[3] Foster care systems are in place in many developing countries, but I will not be addressing that in the paper.

time, “should [a] child lose his or her parents, the baptismal rite required the godparents to promise that they would provide for the child, both spiritually and materially” (Schmidt 133). In these ways, the Church pursued Jesus’s heart for children experiencing vulnerabilities.

After Christianity was legalized in A.D. 313, “Christians also cared for many child orphans in orphanotrophia (orphan + trophia = rearer, nourisher)” (Schmidt 145). *Orphanotrophia*, as its root word alludes, was the first form of what we would today call an orphanage. As history progressed, “many monasteries also cared for orphans during the Middle Ages. Over the centuries, orphanages supported by Christian charity continued to spread throughout Europe” (Schmidt 133). The first recorded orphanage in the U.S. was established by nuns “in 1729 to care for White children, orphaned by conflict between Indians and Whites” (“Orphanages” 5). These institutions were “viewed as an advance over the colonial conditions of relief provided for children which allowed them to be housed with adult criminals and deviants” (“Orphanages” 5). The notion of building and supporting orphanages has been engrained in the Church since its beginning, and this concept has remained one of the Church’s primary approaches to “orphan care” ever since.

In the early 20th century, a shift away from institutionalized care began to take place. Headed by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909, the first Conference on the Care of Dependent Children declared the end of “the institutionalization of children” (Mulheir et al. 7). The conference stated that “children should not be removed from their families except for urgent and compelling reasons, and if necessary poor families should receive financial aid to support their children. Children who had to be removed from their families should be cared for by foster families” (Mulheir et al. 7). This was a pivotal moment in the U.S., as it signaled the beginning of a transition away from institutional care toward children being placed in families.

Around the same time that the U.S. shifted away from institutions, there began to be more involvement in global "orphan care." With the advent of globalization, charity was no longer "limited to those we knew and those we could see;" instead, the "moral horizon of compassion became global" (Myers, *Engaging Globalization* 123). For most developing countries, "institutional care is a relatively recent import. In most cases, it was introduced early in the twentieth century by missionaries or colonial governments, replicating what was then common in their home countries" (Williamson and Greenberg 8). As this effect of globalization took root, the Western "cultural influence proceeded so subtly" that the institutionalization of children became an accepted idea among many developing countries (Tomlinson 372). Although the West had begun to transition away from institutionalization to family-based care,[4] this was not the approach that became globally exported.

Today, the Church continues to care for the "orphans"[5] both domestically and internationally. In a compassion-based response to the HIV and AIDS crisis in Africa, the creation of orphanages by Western Christian donors has been prolific (Powell et al. 8, 18). A study in Zimbabwe found that over a 10-year period the number of orphanages doubled and that over 80% of these new orphanages were funded by faith-based organizations (Powell et al. 6). After the devastating earthquake in 2010, "Lumos identified more than 130 US-based churches, faith-based organizations, and individuals that had donated to institutions in Haiti" (Mulheir et al. 8) and "estimates that the total amount of support to Haitian orphanages exceeds $100 million annually" (Vernaelde and Guillaume 5). This is more than 130 times the annual budget of the Haitian child protection agency, 5 times the annual budget of the Haitian Ministry of Social Affairs, and nearly

[4] Family-based care focuses on a child being in a stable and intimate family, examples of this type of care would be foster care, relative care, or child-headed households.

[5] Quotations marks will be used when the definition or idea of an orphan is misused or interpreted incorrectly

half of the U.S. foreign aid provided for Haiti in 2017 (Vernaelde and Guillaume 5). These numbers are staggering when we think about the number of churches invested in caring for children worldwide. Driven by compassion and the desire to reflect Jesus, the Church has enormous potential to impact the lives of children around the world.

This history matters because it reminds us that caring for children must evolve with time. Each of these moments in history reflect the needs and challenges of that time. Some efforts have been successful while others have not, but the goal is to recognize that contexts change and often our language does not.

3. Why the Church Cares for Orphans

At the beginning of my research, I wanted to further understand how Evangelical churches engage with "orphans," how we inform ourselves about the ministries we support, how we ensure ethical and responsible stewardship, and what we believe our roles to be in child welfare. Through interviews with many church engagement directors and directors of nonprofits, I found that motivations and decisions vary considerably "church-by-church" (Ruiz), and many "churches have their own agenda [about] what change they want to see and in what capacity" (Bardi). Although I expected variation to some degree, the reality is that there was no common denominator among them; each church chooses different ministries for its own reasons, often a pastor's preference or a specific Bible verse they value.

Looking at the Church as a whole, works of compassion are embedded throughout the Bible and the Christian faith. I grew up continually hearing that part of our calling as Christians is to "care for widows and orphans." Jesus showed us this example as He walked the earth and it has since become part of church culture, language, and action. James 1:27 tells readers that pure religion involves "[looking] after orphans in their distress" (*New International Version*). The

ESV Bible translates this as visiting them "in their affliction." James also writes that without works our faith is dead, and Micah writes that our calling is to "act justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (*New King James Version*, James 2:26, Micah 6:8). Daniel Groody, Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, emphasizes that "the doing of justice is not the application of religious faith, but its substance; without it, God remains unknown" (55). There is a natural response of compassion resulting from following Jesus, but *why* we respond cannot be disconnected from *how* we respond.

Our actions matter deeply. For so long I believed that it was a great honor and calling to visit, love, and play with "orphans" in a developing country, but I was unaware of the effects these actions have on children, families, and communities. Acting solely out of compassion can unknowingly bring injustice to others, and that is no justice at all. The reality is that having an "emotional response to the global orphan care crisis - the feeling that *we have to do something* - is a good place to start but a harmful place to end" (Brinton and Bennett 39). While it may be guilt, sadness, or even hope that draws us into caring for children experiencing vulnerabilities, we must examine the way that our *why* affects our *how*.

4. Defining Family

When discussing how to care for children experiencing vulnerabilities, it is important to discuss family because each child that we encounter either has a family or had a family at one point. To care for a child without their family context is to only care for *part* of that child. As I have witnessed the Evangelical church's involvement in the "orphan crisis," I kept asking myself why we are not supporting families *before* their children end up separated. I have observed a general lack of engagement in family preservation efforts and wondered if this stems from our

view of family. To care for children and families effectively, it is necessary to have awareness of the way that we, and those we seek to serve, perceive family.

To explore the perception of family qualitatively, I used a research process of *imaginative variation*, which explores the various definitions and underlying factors that contribute to the experience of family (Merriam and Tisdell 27). As I conducted interviews of church leaders, nonprofit directors, and family support specialists, I began each interview by asking how they define family. The answers I received were not contingent on a particular culture or location, but rather based on personal family experiences or interactions with other families (see table 1).

Table 1

Interview Excerpts: How do you define family?

Categories of Family	Interview Excerpts
Biological Family	People that I "share a last name with or I'm connected with through marriage or births. My family are the people that genetically I'm connected with." (Monte, SFFC Family Coach Supervisor of Safe Families for Children)
Sharing a Roof	A group of two or more people "sharing one roof and sharing one table" (Simon, Social Welfare Director of Christian Alliance for Children of Zambia)
Love Family Blood Family	"There are love families and blood families." (Sandra, Co-Founder and Church Relations & Engagement Director of Alliance for Children Everywhere)
Created through Loss	"We have families that are created through loss and that's a lot of what I see because I work in the foster care part…but they're family." (Jodi, Family Resource Specialist of Children's Administration of Montana State)

Nuclear Family	"If we are working [in the U.S.] we have just the nuclear family." (Jennie, founder of Alliance for Children Everywhere)
Extended Family	"For the indigenous people it's more mother, father, children, grandparent, and some aunties" (Matrida, Communications Coordinator of Christian Alliance for Children of Zambia)
A place of belonging	"A place of belonging, a sense of knowing that you are loved no matter what" (Elli, Director of Faith to Action)

If personal definitions of family vary this much, then this variation must be affecting our approaches to caring for children and families experiencing vulnerabilities. When our definition of family differs from those we seek to serve, we are prone to overlook what family means to them, leading us to support what *we*, not *they*, call family. This realization led me to question if we are doing the same thing with defining *orphan*. We often say that we need to address the "orphan crisis," but that phrase is missing a critical piece of the picture. Who are these "orphans?" If our definitions of *orphan* vary, then our approaches to engaging with these children are going to vary as well.

5. Church Language versus Expert Language

The words used in the Church shape our vocabulary around children experiencing vulnerabilities. The Church experiences a sub-culture of language that only a "believer" in Christ or "born-again Christian" will know after being part of a church for some time. There are proper ways of speaking within a church, swear words are frowned upon, phrases like "God bless you" are not just for sneezing, people who have never heard of Jesus are referred to as "unreached," and children experiencing vulnerabilities are called "orphans."

Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO) is a well-known network that churches, non-profits, and individuals in the Christian community look to as a leader in caring for orphans and children experiencing vulnerabilities. They believe that "ultimately, our final hope is this: that Christians in every nation will rise as the primary answer to the needs of the orphans in their midst, glorifying God as a reflection of His great love for the orphan and for us" ("On Understanding Orphan Statistics" 4). They write that "the term [*orphan*] itself helps a society - perhaps especially those that have been influenced by Judeo-Christian values - to connect the needs of vulnerable children with the clear mandate in Scripture to protect and care for the 'fatherless' and the 'orphan'" ("On Understanding Orphan Statistics" 4). These beliefs are shaped by Scripture, but we must be aware that they are primarily influenced by two words: *orphan* and *fatherless*.

Christian churches use the words *orphan* and *fatherless* as a symbol for all children experiencing vulnerabilities. One reason that we use these words is because they give us a simple way to understand a complex issue. Although striving for understanding is a well-intentioned pursuit, linguist Steven Pinker reminds us that "each idea has distinctively human quirks that make it useful for reasoning about certain things but that can lead to fallacies and confusion when we try to apply it more broadly" (26). One expression of this broad definition is the way that many churches include foster care in their "orphan care" ministries, even though we do not call children in the foster care system orphans. My own church felt unsettled that we did this, yet we struggled to come up with an alternative name for our "orphan care" ministry. Anibal Ruiz, the Church Engagement Director of Olive Crest, a family support and foster care organization, believes that this is because the Church has focused so heavily on global "orphan care" by asking, "How do we help kids in other countries?" that we have "tried to fit foster care into our

model" (Ruiz). Many child welfare experts that I interviewed pointed out that they understand why churches call their ministries "orphan care," but simultaneously expressed frustration that foster care and family preservation are included in that category, because it is not an accurate representation of the foster care system's goals. Reunification and restoration of families is the foster care system's primary goal, but the word *orphan* gives the impression that these children have no family. The terminology of "orphan care" can be further misleading because a child in a single-parent household in the U.S. would never be called an orphan, but a child with the same circumstance in a developing country would technically be labeled a *single orphan*, thus falling under an "orphan care" ministry. We maintain that the U.S. has no orphans, yet we apply the label of "orphan" to children that face similar family circumstances in other countries.

Conversely, experts working on child welfare in developing countries have defined terminology to give clarity and context to specific conditions of children experiencing vulnerabilities. A *single orphan* is a child who has lost one parent while a *double orphan* is a child who has lost both parents ("Orphans- Press Centre"). A *social orphan* is a child whose parents are unable to care for them ("On Understanding Orphan Statistics" 3). Each of these terms enables practitioners to more accurately understand what is needed for a child's unique situation (see table 2).

Table 2

Classification and Definitions of *Orphan*

Classifications of *Orphan*	Definitions
Orphan	"Any child with at least one parent dead or with unknown survival status, since a parent whose survival status is unknown is clearly not playing an active parenting role" (Schenk 895)
Double	No living parents ("Orphans- Press Centre")

Single	One living parent (“Orphans- Press Centre”)
Paternal	The loss or death of a father (Schenk)
Maternal	The loss or death of a mother (Schenk)
Social	A child without parental care, even if parents are alive (Prisiazhnaia 24)
Judicial	A child legally considered an orphan and “in need of [outside] protection” (Kavak 5)

Unfortunately, a gap exists between child welfare experts and faith-based communities. Experts in the field are typically formally educated and have a strong grasp of the context they are working in, while churches are primarily motivated out of faith. The terminology that provides context for experts has not made its way into the language of church congregations.

At the same time, there are two issues with expert language that I have identified. First, expert language does not address the Biblical precedent that influences the words we use as Christians. This hinders integration of expert language into church culture. Second, expert language does a poor job of disconnecting from the word *orphan*, “because most international organizations have used the term [orphan] to refer to children who have lost one or both parents, but many people understand the term to refer to children with no parents" (“Global Facts About Orphanages” 1). While *single orphan* may be understood by experts, the broader understanding of *orphan* inaccurately conveys that child’s needs to the general community. Christians associate the word *orphan* with children in need of a home or adoption, while under the *single orphan* definition, the child’s family may just need support to keep their family together.

Statistics prove how widely our definitions vary, with the estimated number of “orphans” ranging from “15.1 million children worldwide [who] have lost both parents ('double orphan')”

all the way to "140 million children worldwide [who] have lost either one parent ('single orphan') or both parents" ("On Understanding Orphan Statistics" 3). If our understanding of those we label as "orphans" is unclear, then our perception of their needs will be unclear and, as a result, our goals, actions, and outcomes will be misinformed. Churches are some of the biggest funders and implementers of programs to care for children; therefore, it is crucial that they are informed in their efforts. The Church cannot effectively engage with social systems unless we pursue the same level of knowledge and understanding that experts have. We must remember that informed language leads to informed action.

6. "Orphan" Language Affects Our Perception

I have suggested that language affects our perception, but in order to understand whether or not it matters if we call children orphans, it is important to examine the words themselves and their deeper meanings. In the following section we will use *narrative inquiry*, a process that examines how we communicate thoughts, stories, and experiences (Merriam and Tisdell 231). In this process, we must be willing to challenge ourselves by asking how the language we use reflects what we think of these children.

6.1 Language Semantics

Conceptual semantics is the linguistic term for "the language of thought" (Pinker 4). According to linguist Stephen Pinker, language forms visual and descriptive ideas in our minds, from the "elementary concepts that define" a word to an "image of what it refers to" (Pinker 9). Our brains endlessly process the words that we hear and store them as patterns, impressions, and imagery, working to create connections between words and the world around us. Not only do the semantics of language influence our thoughts, but they also contribute to "a shared understanding of the truth" (Pinker 3). Our words reinforce beliefs about reality as they become engrained in

our language or subculture, but what happens when the underlying assumptions about those words are inaccurate or have alternate implications? If not wielded carefully, our words hold the power to unconsciously create bias and presumptions that permeate their way into our understanding of the world.

If our words have this much power, then what thoughts and assumptions do we use to understand what it means to be an orphan? To examine the Evangelical Church's assumptions behind the word *orphan*, I took a piece of paper and wrote down the words that I have heard associated with *orphan*: alone, destitute, adoptable, lacking, in need of love, deprived, lost, afraid, hungry, poor, without family, dirty, neglected, abandoned. These words are often co-located with *orphan*, meaning that they commonly appear alongside or in the context of the word *orphan*. Reflecting on these words is both powerful and degrading because each of them is negative. If we took away the context and read these words in isolation, we could just as well be describing a lost animal. Not one of these words associates an orphan with positive perceptions: a childhood, friendship, identity, family, future, or a place of belonging.

6.2 Metaphorical Language

The reason that we use metaphors and categorical language to talk about orphans is because we don't have a good grasp on the experience of being an orphan. Our use of stereotypes allows our brains to categorize our world when presented with a concept that we don't understand. To understand an abstract concept that we have not personally experienced, we apply words and concepts that we understand more clearly (Lakoff and Johnson 115). Our reality can be so far removed from the reality of an orphan that we only know how to use associated words and references to sort through our thoughts and talk about their circumstances in a way that makes sense to us. This enables us to categorize, group, quantify, and, ultimately, reason

about an experience that is foreign to us (Lakoff and Johnson 25). This conceptual sorting is important because it gives our brains something to grasp, allowing us to move forward; however, we must be aware of when this process oversimplifies an issue and distorts our understanding of reality.

6.2.1 Hidden Metaphors in our Culture

Our way of thinking about and engaging with "orphans" is deeply embedded in our culture, entertainment, and verbal and written language. We often do not realize it, but the depiction of an orphan "is built into the conceptual system of the culture in which [we] live" (Lakoff and Johnson 64). Some of the most popular books in our culture are about orphans: Harry Potter, Oliver Twist, Annie, and Madeline. Harry Potter lives with his aunt, uncle, and cousin who deprive him of basic necessities and confine him to live in a cupboard under the stairs, while his antagonist Voldemort lives in an orphanage until he is old enough to live on his own. Oliver Twist grows up in an orphanage after his mother dies, gets moved to an abusive workhouse at age nine, escapes to the streets, and is recruited by a gang of criminals. Annie lives in an orphanage with an abusive caretaker but longs to know the love of a family. Madeline, in the original book, lives away from her parents at a boarding school for girls, but since the book only mentions her parents once, the movie took the approach that she was an "orphan." These patterns of the orphan experience are so engrained that we often do not realize it, because "when we are living by metaphors … we tend not to see them as metaphors at all" (Lakoff and Johnson 66). In their own ways, each of these famous pieces of literature reinforces our ideas of who an orphan is and their experience: parentless and alone.

The concept of an orphan has also permeated our writing; *orphans* and *widows* are terms used in typesetting[6] guides as something to avoid ("Avoid Orphans and Widows- Writing Guides"). In typesetting, an orphan is "when paragraphs *begin* on the *last* line of a page," while a widow is "when paragraphs *end* on the *first* line of a page" (Bringhurst 43-44). The common way to remember these definitions is that an orphan does not have a past and a widow does not have a future (Bringhurst 43-44). These mnemonics, or memory aids, are intended to trigger our existing understanding of orphans and widows. However, in order for mnemonics to be effective, there must be shared knowledge of the triggering idea that the speaker can utilize to reach a common understanding. In this case, the common knowledge is the belief about orphans and widows. Understanding *orphans* and *widows* as isolated lines of text is built upon the reinforcement of our existing perception of them as isolated members of society, having no past or future. This is so embedded in our language that "it is difficult to see that there is anything hidden by the metaphor or even to see that there is a metaphor here at all. This is so much the conventional way of thinking about language that it is sometimes hard to imagine that it might not fit reality" (Lakoff and Johnson 11). Unfortunately, these metaphors not only serve to invoke our memory or embellish our language, but also bring reinforced, and often inaccurate, perceptions along with them.

The term *orphan* has even made its way into U.S. pharmaceutical terminology. An *orphan disease* is a rare disease affecting "fewer than 200,000 people nationwide" ("Drugs- Orphan Products"**)**. This term came to be in 1968 when a pediatrician, Dr. Shirkley, observed that "infants and children [were] becoming therapeutic or pharmaceutical orphans" because drugs with limited commercial value, known as *orphan drugs*, were "deemed too expensive

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[6] Typography is how the words, sentences, and paragraphs are arranged on a page. It is for the purpose of creating visual ease to the reader ("Reading 16: Typography").

relative to expected economic return" (Sasinowski and Hull). Eventually, the diseases requiring these drugs became "known as orphans because companies were not interested in adopting them" (**"**Drugs- Orphan Products"**)**. These diseases are not considered worth the time, money, or effort required to invest in them. The association between the words *orphan* and *disease*, in this context, are powerful, considering that diseases are thought of as unclean, contaminating, and requiring quarantine; this implies that an orphan carries these characteristics as well.

6.2.2 Sin and Grace Metaphors

Richard Beck, author of *Unclean,* examines how metaphors help shape our Christian faith in his chapter titled "Morality and Metaphors." He emphasizes the power of metaphors by pointing out that "religious populations can examine the same moral or social situation and come to radically different judgements depending upon the metaphor they are using to understand the situation" (Beck 52). Looking specifically at metaphors of sin and grace, Beck explains that these concepts are "framed by purity/pollution and clean/unclean metaphors," therefore causing us to connect words associated with sin to words associated with filth (Beck 36).

(see table 3).

Table 3

Sin and Grace Metaphors[7]

Metaphor	Sin	Salvation/Grace	Textual Example
Familial	Orphan	Adoption	Ephesians 1:5[8]
Rescue	Perishing	Saved	2 Corinthians 2:15[9]

[7] Table adapted from page 35 of *Unclean* by Richard Beck.

[8] *"God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure" (New Living Translation,* Ephesians 1:5*).*

[9] *"For to God we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing"* (*Christian Standard Bible*, 2 Corinthians 2:15).

Source: Beck, Richard. *Unclean.* Cascade Books. 2011

Notice that *orphan* is listed under sin. Sin is considered impure, so by this metaphorical association we view being an orphan as unclean and separate from God. We believe that being saved from our sin involves being adopted into the family of God, and although this is simply a metaphor to understand part of our faith, we must be careful with metaphors because they can "distort as much as they illuminate" (Beck 36). When I became aware of this metaphor, I finally understood why I grew up believing that all "orphans" need a home or to be adopted. It is a beautiful metaphor to understand that Jesus rescues us, adopts us into His family, and calls us His children, but when we apply the same metaphor to a different context, it can cause us to inaccurately believe that the solution for "orphans," especially when the term is used too broadly, is to rescue, save, and adopt.

7. Linguistic Interpretation of Bible Verses About Orphans

Three of the most quoted verses around "caring for orphans" are James 1:27, Isaiah 1:17, and Deuteronomy 10:18. These verses are important to acknowledge because they are often our motivation for being involved in "orphan care." I want to be clear that, as a Christ-follower, I believe the Word of God is true and sacred; I simply believe that present-day linguistic and cultural influences can influence our understanding of the original Biblical language and cultural context. For this reason, we will look at the verses used in these three verses and our present-day interpretation of them. Assessing our usage of these verses is the only way to ensure that our perception matches reality and that we are understanding God's heart for children experiencing vulnerabilities.

7.1 James 1:27

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (*New International Version*, James 1:27).

Two points of emphasis in this verse are "distress" and "look after." The word "distress" implies a state of being, while "look after" implies a state of action. When I was a lifeguard, I was taught the phrase "swimmer in distress" for someone who showed signs of drowning. It meant that they were in need of immediate rescue and it was my job to look for those specific swimmers. The phrase "look after" is an active verb that places us in an action state and the orphan in a passive state of being. Our interpretation of this verse indicates that we are the ones to bring rescue and relief, making the orphan the passive receiver of this action.

7.2 Isaiah 1:17

"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (*New International Version*, Isaiah 1:17).

In this verse we will focus on "take up." The word "defend," used here as well, will be explored in the Deuteronomy section below. What is interesting about the phrase "take up" is that it is an orientational metaphor, which provides understanding through spacial orientation (Lakoff and Johnson 14). In his book, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff writes about "me-first orientation," which is how we orient ourselves and others. The "me-first orientation" identifies concepts that we orient ourselves to first, "up, front, active, good, here, and now," while "down, backward, passive, bad, there, and then are all oriented away" from us (Lakoff and Johnson 132). By this thinking, if we are the ones taking *up* a cause, we are active and positioned higher, while the person we are lifting must be positioned lower. The implication of this is profound, because we innately orient ourselves in this verse, leaving the subsequent noun,

fatherless, in the opposite orientation of us, below and passive. We unwittingly interpret the fatherless as beneath us and in need of us.

7.3 Deuteronomy 10:18

"He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing" (*New International Version*, Deuteronomy 10:18).

This verse highlights the nature of God, but I have often heard it recited as a command for Christ-followers. The word "defends," here, as well as above in Isaiah, is an active verb, implying action on behalf of the fatherless. It indicates holding the power and protection of another, standing in front of them, and fighting on their behalf. Our understanding of "defend" suggests that in order for there to be a need for protection, the receiver is either helpless or passive. It is powerful to understand God as our defender, and this metaphor enhances our understanding of His nature, but there must be caution not to insert ourselves in His place and put the "fatherless" in our place. While we want to be imitators of the character of God, our role is not to relegate others as helpless or passive in their own story, but rather to bestow value upon them by coming alongside them as partners.

8. The Need for Accurate Language

Our words matter because they can mean the difference between family unification or family separation. In her TEDx talk, "How the Words We Use Affect the Way We Think," Mary Page Wilson-Lyons emphasizes that "the way we talk about our work is just important as the work we do… Every message always has an implicit, and maybe even unintended, message" (Wilson-Lyons 5:21-5:27, 5:52-6:05). The Christian Alliance for Orphans reiterates this point that "if we are to communicate with humility, credibility, and integrity, Christian orphan advocates must both accurately understand and carefully present orphan-related statistics. Failure

to do so undermines the strength of our advocacy and can misguide the actions that organizations, churches, and individuals take on behalf of 'orphans.' Meanwhile, an accurate grasp and communication of the true nature of the need provides a strong foundation for an effective, well-focused response" ("On Understanding Orphan Statistics" 1). As a Christ-follower, we have a responsibility to love my global neighbors well, representing them with respect, kindness, and accuracy. If our goal is to care for children experiencing vulnerabilities, then we must take due diligence in our advocacy and actions.

We need accurate language for talking about children experiencing vulnerabilities because our language affects our perception of these children and their needs. We often do not realize the impact of our words because we are so far removed from the issue and our image of an orphan is shaped by "mass media, movies, and literature" as "a poor, hungry child, abandoned and forgotten" (Prisiazhnaia 25). Although these images can be truthful at times, they do not always present an accurate picture, causing our own cultural context to shape our view of "orphans." While studying Evangelicals' engagement with children experiencing vulnerabilities, sociologist Samuel Perry noted that Evangelicals "have created a situation in which 'orphans' have become singled out, sacralized, and made the explicit focus of activism beyond what either the Old or New Testaments would justify. This is evidenced by the fact that the movement has been so willing to extend the term 'orphan' to *all* vulnerable children, regardless of whether they have one or both parents still living" (Perry 223). Our hyper-focus on "orphans" has blinded us to seeing each child's individual situation. Furthermore, the term *vulnerable children* implies helplessness and the need for rescue. For these reasons, we need more accuracy in our vocabulary when referring to children experiencing vulnerabilities, not just generalized, all-encompassing terms.

The language that we use must reflect the state of the world today. When we refer to "orphans" as hungry and abandoned children without parents or a home, we are viewing these children in an isolated context and can easily miss their actual needs. According to UNICEF:

> Of the nearly 140 million children classified as orphans, 15.1 million have lost both parents. Evidence clearly shows that the vast majority of orphans are living with a surviving parent, grandparent, or other family member. 95 percent of all orphans are over the age of five. This definition contrasts with concepts of orphan in many industrialized countries, where a child must have lost both parents to qualify as an orphan. UNICEF and numerous international organizations adopted the broader definition of orphan in the mid-1990s as the AIDS pandemic began leading to the death of millions of parents worldwide, leaving an ever-increasing number of children growing up without one or more parents. So the terminology of a 'single orphan' - the loss of one parent - and a 'double orphan' - the loss of both parents - was born to convey this growing crisis. However, this difference in terminology can have concrete implications for policies and programming for children. For example, UNICEF's 'orphan' statistic might be interpreted to mean that globally there are 140 million children in need of a new family, shelter, or care. This misunderstanding may then lead to responses that focus on providing care for individual children rather than supporting the families and communities that care for orphans and are in need of support. ("Orphans- Press Centre")

Orphanages are an example of the way that the Church has focused on the issue in an isolated context. The primary word associated with an orphanage is *orphan*, so, driven by compassion, when we hear of children who are "orphans," we are compelled to open, support, or visit orphanages. Unfortunately, in many cases, we are unaware of the underlying circumstances that

have caused a child to be separated from their family. While there are cases where a child has no one to care for them, the primary cause of institutionalization is poverty ("Global Facts About Orphanages" 2). Our isolated focus on orphanages causes these institutions to "continue to receive widespread support from overseas donors and visitors, which results in vast amounts of resource directed towards residential care services disproportionate to actual need" ("Kinnected: Keeping Children in Families" 6). Imagine if our language conveyed that these children need individual love and belonging, rather than simply a home; our approach to caring for them would be radically changed. With accurate language, we can convey when families are in need of support so that they can remain together, thus shifting our focus from supporting children isolated from their families to supporting families as a whole.

9. Perception Influences Our Actions

Our perception matters because "we act according to the way we conceive of things" (Lakoff and Johnson 5). Now that we have seen the power of perception, we are going to look at the actions that have resulted from our understanding of "orphans." While there are many contexts in which the Church cares for children, the particular areas that I am going to focus on are where we engage with orphanages and poverty.

9.1 Engagement with Orphanages

The Church has long "been involved in the transformation of society, especially as it took sides with the poor and oppressed" (Pillay 11). One of the primary ways the Church has been involved in this transformation is through the funding of orphanages. Our perception has conveyed to us that millions of "orphans" need homes, so our compassion-driven response has been to use our resources to bring them comfort and meet their needs. If we put our personal understanding of "orphans" aside for a moment and look at the statistics, we see that only 20% of

children in orphanages are *double orphans*, which tells us that the other 80% have at least one living parent ("Children in Institutions" 2). It is easy to disconnect from this statistic as an intangible number, but we cannot overlook that this means 80% of the children in orphanages have a family. Each time I read this statistic it makes me wonder how we came to see children simply as orphans and not part of a family system. It is not uncommon to hear in an Evangelical church that we are "blessed to be a blessing to others," but have we ever stopped to think if the orphanages we support are helping or hindering a community? Although each community is unique, "in countries where there are very few community-based services designed to assist families, the presence of an orphanage will create orphans" ("Kinnected: Keeping Children in Families" 6). Orphanages appear to provide everything a desperate parent is struggling to provide for their child—food, water, shelter, education—and appears to provide a better life. In reality, orphanages place desperate parents, relatives, and caregivers in a position to make an impossible choice between caring for their child and providing reliable food, shelter, and education. Unfortunately, orphanages are the mark of stepping in too late; we have become "reactionary, not proactive" (Mejico). With poverty being the primary cause of institutionalization, orphanages are a signal that a community is struggling to meet their basic needs and has accepted desperate measures to care for their children. Despite the shift in our domestic practices of caring for "orphans," we have continued to export this orphanage trend. Now, whether or not it is our place to step into these communities is a different debate, but the fact remains that as Christ-followers, many of us continue to make the choice to be involved. In light of this, I challenge us to look critically at how our actions affect the communities we are involved with.

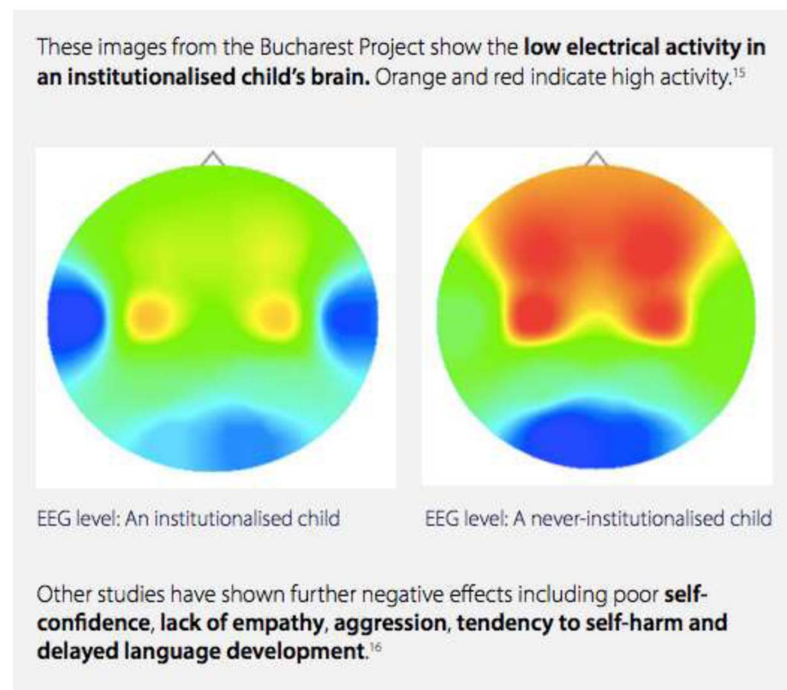
One area where we need to engage respectfully and responsibly is *orphan tourism***.** *Orphan tourism* is when well-intentioned people go on a trip to volunteer and “love on the children” in an orphanage. Although this is a very common practice among churches, in reality it does much more harm than good. Because this norm is so engrained in church culture, we often do not realize how it is a double standard. In the U.S., “our government’s child protection systems would not allow us to visit any kind of shelter or residential care home and most of us wouldn’t consider asking. It would be considered a violation of the child’s right to privacy and a risk to the children” (“Kinnected: Keeping Children in Families” 15). Yet, in developing countries, we often invite unvetted and unqualified volunteers to have nearly unlimited access to a vulnerable population. We wouldn’t let strangers interact in this way with our own children, so we must question why we have viewed this as an acceptable way of engaging with children in developing countries. Due to this unregulated level of access, the unsettling reality is that children are far more likely to be abused and trafficked when living in an orphanage (Mulheir et al. 9-10). While there may be appropriate times for *skilled* volunteers, such as doctors, dentists, counselors, or social workers, to visit an orphanage, there should be monitoring, oversight, and an effort to mentor locals to do the work long-term. The ultimate priority is to protect the children and their right to remain safe. For this reason, we must be willing to evaluate the impact of our actions and be aware of when our compassion crosses over into endangerment.

I have indicated that orphanages are not the best option for children; therefore, I want to take a deeper look at the long-term effects that institutionalization has on a child’s brain development, social-emotional development, and attachment. We often assume that the caregivers and other children in the orphanage become a child’s family, and while it might seem family-like, children lack the individual nurturing that they need when there is a large number of

children and few caregivers. Although orphanages are created out of good intention, they simplify a multifaceted issue and undermine the complexity of a child's well-being. Research shows that "living in an orphanage from an early age can result in severe developmental delays, disability, physical stunting, and potentially irreversible intellectual and psychological damage. The negative effects are more severe the longer a child remains in an orphanage" ("Global Facts About Orphanages" 6). Below is a brain scan illustrating just how detrimental the impact can be (see fig. 1).

Figure 1

Brain Scan of an Institutionalized Child versus a Never Institutionalized Child



Source: "Children in Institutions - The Risks" *Lumos*. 3 Jan. 2017, lumos.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2017/03/Factsheet_Lumos_Risks.pdf.

Orphanages also impact a child's social-emotional development due to the lack of individualized care and attention. In an intimate family setting, a child's social-emotional skills develop as they watch adults around them display healthy emotions, giving the child a safe place

to discover and express their own emotions. In contrast, "living in a closed institution limits orphans' ability to gain social experience; it substantially reduces the number and quality of models and constructs of behavior that are accessible to be learned" (Prisiazhnaia 26). Children in orphanages will typically "be group-fed on a schedule rather than on demand, [and] diapers will be changed on a schedule rather than as needed" ("Children, Orphanages, and Families" 13). In many cases, an understaffed orphanage is simply trying to care for as many children as possible, but limited individual attention teaches a child that their voice is not heard and their world is insecure. When children cry out of need for love, attention, or hunger but do not receive a response, they quickly learn that their needs will not be met in the way they need. As their brains are developing, this reinforces the understanding that they are alone, they must comfort themselves, and their needs will not be met. For this reason, orphanages are only an appropriate solution when used as short-term, transitional care while seeking a permanent family placement for a child.

Attachment is another critical development that is affected by time in an orphanage. At an early age, children form attachment with their primary caregivers through various interactions, such as when a caregiver responds to their cry. This teaches a child to form trust and reinforces that they are safe, loved, and cared for because their needs are being met. Young children form a secure attachment in the early years of life by having consistent, reliable interactions with their caregivers. When a child is one among many, must compete for attention, or has an unreliable or inconsistent caregiver, their attachment is unable to form in a healthy way. As a result, their brain must work tirelessly to process and cope, which prevents their body, especially their brain, from developing optimally. These early experiences are the foundation upon which all future relationships will be built, and an insecure attachment can result in

inconsistent responses to stress and anxiety, co-dependence, and difficulty developing trust and close relationships (Fraley).

Orphan tourism can also factor into creating and reinforcing an insecure attachment ("Going on a Short-Term Missions Trip"). If you have been to an orphanage, you may have experienced children running into your arms and not wanting to leave your side. While this may seem endearing in the moment, if we step back and ask ourselves if this is normal behavior for a child, we realize that children with secure attachment are typically apprehensive of interacting with a stranger. "Stranger danger" is our instinctual way of protecting ourselves, but for a child with an insecure attachment, this "indiscriminate interest in people with lack of appropriate wariness of strangers" is known as *reactive attachment disorder* (Sigelman 668). When adult "caregivers" constantly switch in and out of a child's life, the child is continually trying to form attachment, but each time an adult leaves the attachment is broken once again ("Going on a Short-Term Missions Trip"). This unintentional harm can significantly impact a child's ability to form stable and healthy relationships in the future.

9.2 Engagement with Poverty

In order to reevaluate our approaches to caring for children, we must not only look at individual needs, but also at the underlying systemic factors that are causing children with families to be separated. To disregard these underlying factors would be a disservice to those we aim to serve, because "where suffering is caused, at least in part, by societal or systemic factors, rather than singularly individual factors, charitable service aimed at meeting the needs of individuals and groups without *also* challenging those systemic factors may build social consent that perpetuates the suffering's powerful systemic roots" (Moe-Lobeda 92). We can see evidence of this systemic social consent in the way that orphanages have become "just as much cultural

institutions as they are structural" institutions (Roa). Orphanages were virtually non-existent in developing countries until introduced by Western countries, and since then, many communities in these countries have become accustomed to the idea that placing a child in an orphanage will provide a better life than one with their struggling family. Justice that reflects Christ's heart requires addressing all systems that impact a child experiencing vulnerabilities, with transformation taking place on both a personal and systemic level.

I am not saying that there are not immediate physical needs that an orphanage can meet, but by focusing on short-term fixes to immediate needs, rather than the underlying issues, the Evangelical church has sacrificed the long-term well-being of children in many developing countries. As a result, this has led us to an "orphanage crisis," not just an "orphan crisis." There will always be more children to be placed in orphanages if our response is satisfied at the surface level; part of engaging in justice is doing the difficult work of addressing the root cause.

In the case of orphanages, the root cause of this injustice is poverty; "studies have shown that poverty, not the absence of family, is the most common reason for placing children in orphanages" ("Global Facts About Orphanages" 2). Separation primarily takes place when a crisis or challenge occurs in a family that has "little to fall back on in terms of assets or sustainable coping strategies" (Harland-Scott 8). The combination of poverty plus other challenges, such as caring for a child with a disability, lack of access to education, or stigmas that ostracize certain children,[10] can lead a family to believe that placing their child in an orphanage is their only option (Harland-Scott 8). For this reason, "poverty should never be the only justification for the removal of a child from parental care, rather a signal to provide support

[10] For example, "90% of the 11 million abandoned or orphaned children in India are girls" due to gender discrimination ("Children in Institutions" 5).

for the family" ("Kinnected: Keeping Children in Families" 13). Orphanages disguise themselves as poverty alleviation, yet the poverty of the families in these communities remain unchanged.

When discussing poverty, the Evangelical church needs to be willing to recognize that we are engaging from a place of privilege, and therefore must humbly set aside our cultural views of poverty and our pre-conceived solutions. There is a tendency to discuss "development and the possibility of eradication of poverty" as a "quasi religious mission: as the moral duty of Western industrialized countries to take active steps to help those who are most backward technically (and culturally) to advance along the road of progress" (Myers, *Walking with the Poor* 27). Unfortunately, when we bring our own assumptions about poverty with us into the developing countries we seek to serve, "the importance of maintaining a grandmother's love and care for a child may be less obvious than the child's torn clothes or the dirt floor of the grandmother's house" (Williamson and Greenberg 12). I have heard many stories of building orphanages due to extreme poverty in a community, but I challenge us to question and expand our motives. Is our motive solely to provide for "poor" children or to care for a community as a whole? Is our motivation to see the effects of poverty and injustice undone? These questions can cause some tension as we wrestle with them, but our *why* is just as important as our *how*.

10. Biblical Context of Caring for Orphans

Language is powerful and has substantial influence upon our actions; therefore, it is our responsibility to use language that accurately reflects the state of the world and appropriately influences our actions. As Christ-followers, it is important to look at Biblical scripture and examine how it shapes our language around caring for "orphans."

Through the use of *hermeneutics*, "a theoretical framework for interpretive understanding, or meaning, with special attention to context and original purpose" (Merriam and

Tisdell 34), we can look at the original cultural and historical context of Scripture and understand God's mandate to care for orphans and widows. Theologian Gideon Kotzé offers the following question to guide this process: "How are the orphans characterized and in what rhetorical contexts are they mentioned?" (Kotzé 2). In ancient and patriarchal times, "fatherless and/or parentless children did not own landed property or inherit ancestral real estate and, therefore, could not make a living off the land. The loss of their fathers meant that orphans were left without an economic base on which to subsist and without the support of a familial network" (Kotzé 1). The cultural understanding of vulnerable populations, such as orphans and widows, was that they were part of a family unit. This is why "orphan and widow" commonly occur together in the Bible, and why the word *father*less is used to imply a family relation. The context revolves around family because a fatherless child's identity and status is in relation to family. Men were the providers and land bearers, so when a husband passed away the widow and children would be left as desolate, second-class members of society. We see this example in Ruth 1:8-9, where Ruth and her daughters-in-law are experiencing life as widows and seeking protection in another husband's home.

> Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband (*New Living Translation,* Ruth 1:8-9).

The orphans and widows symbolize the vulnerable members of society without value, basic rights, and resources, and God's direction was to value and care for them just as much as he does (Ruiz). God's decree to care for the orphans and widows was a mandate to care for those who are marginalized; with this understanding we ask, "Who is marginalized in society today?"

Understanding the historical context in light of our present-day context enables us to evaluate what it looks like to care for the marginalized in society today. Christian Alliance for Orphans reiterates “that the biblical concept of the 'orphan' and 'fatherless' includes more than just a boy or girl who has lost one or both parents. Rather, it describes the child who faces the world without the provision, protection, and nurture that parents uniquely provide” (“On Understanding Orphan Statistics” 4). It is time for the Church to shift its notion of “caring for the orphan” as an isolated need to seeing these children as part of, or in need of, family. This small but significant shift would change the entirety of our actions because it would direct our focus to ensuring that children are in safe, loving families rather than isolated from their families.

11. Appropriate and Informed Practices

The Evangelical church’s primary engagement with orphanages has been through funding and visiting these institutions. Going forward, our action should take place by partnering with organizations that are implementing effective and sustainable practices alongside communities.

As we seek to partner with organizations, we need to ask ourselves questions that challenge our understanding; as humans we are inclined to align ourselves with people and organizations that fit our same values, but if our understanding is wrong then we will be prone to misinformed engagement. When we step into another country’s crisis as outsiders, are we culturally competent and informed? Do we know what values that culture holds? Are decisions about what is best being placed upon communities we seek to serve, or is their local knowledge and participation being valued? How do we ensure ethical, not just compassion-driven, engagement? These questions can guide us toward informed action; the reality is that most of us don’t know what we are doing when it comes to child welfare, but we want to be a part of creating change. Knowing the best practices allows us to identify reputable organizations that are

already doing effective work and discern those that are not. Our intentionality has the potential to lead to long-term, lasting, and effective change for children, families, and communities.

There is a continuum of alternative care options that allow appropriate responses to the individual situations of children and families. Alternative care should always have "respect for two key principles: the principle of necessity (being sure that alternative care is truly needed) and the principle of suitability (if alternative care is required, ensuring that the care provided is appropriate)" (Laumann 16). In each case, the best fit should be considered based on the unique situation of the child, family, community, and culture. As seen in the table below, which displays the continuum of alternative care, the goal is always a permanent, stable family for a child (see fig. 2). Any type of temporary, unstable care is not sufficient for long-term success**.** Considering the impact of a secure environment on a child's brain and social-emotional development, permanency gives a child the best opportunity to thrive.

Figure 2

The Continuum of Alternative Care

Source: "Kinnected: Keeping Children in Families." *Better Care Network*. 2016, bettercarenetwork.org/library/strengthening-family-care/parenting-support/kinnected-keeping-children-in-families.

Family preservation, providing support to prevent separation in the first place, and *family reunification*, reuniting previously separated families, are the most ideal situations for a family and child. These efforts "are founded in the conviction that many children can be safely protected and treated within their own homes when parents are provided with services and support" (Mullins et al. 265). Unfortunately, these outcomes are not always achievable because "no problem in one field exists in isolation from other areas of human behavior" (Merriam and Tisdell 90-91). When parental care is not possible, family-based alternatives, such as kinship care or foster care, are the next best options for a child ("A Continuum of Care for Orphans and Vulnerable Children"). Even so, there is no perfect solution and every system will come with its own set of issues. Although the U.S. has implemented foster care as a family-based model, our system has its own problems and is not optimal for many children. Some children are in the foster care system for their entire childhood and do not have a permanency plan. While the ideal situation is a "secure life within the context of a child's birth family and birth culture," the child's best interests must remain the most important outcome (Engel 293). While we want to aim for permanency within a family, there are complex factors that require working toward what is best for the family and child in each unique situation.

After hearing about the harms of institutionalization, it is easy to conclude that we should shut down orphanages and redirect their funding to family-based care. While this may be a long-term goal, shutting down orphanages has the potential to be far more damaging in the short-term if there is no plan in place to ensure the safety and well-being of children already in orphanages.

The effectiveness of family-based care is reliant upon the state of the community and families having access to the resources and opportunities they need to care well for their children. Family-based care within a direct community is not always a suitable *immediate* option because it can take time to implement in communities where there is no existing structure of family-based care. The lack of economic opportunity in low-income areas may complicate feeding and caring for additional children without opportunities to generate income. Cultural beliefs and taboos may also need to be addressed prior to implementing family-based care. In rural villages of Nigeria, it is thought that twins possess evil spirits and will haunt the entire village. In the past, these children were killed by the shaman to ensure the safety of the community. Over time, an orphanage was established outside of the village to care for these children, and families compromised by placing their children in the orphanage instead of allowing them to be killed (Sunday). Examples like this are a reminder that there are times when family-based care within a community would not be possible until deeper social norms and cultural beliefs are addressed. It takes time to develop new systems, get community buy-in, and prepare children and families for transition, so we need patience and commitment to see long-term progress.

Throughout history, in all areas of life, from business to education, there have been movements of "best practices," some dissolving and others progressing when better research and innovation came along. The field of caring for children experiencing vulnerabilities is no different. We have made mistakes in the past and will continue to make them in the future, but we can use wisdom and collaboration in order to protect the rights of children to the best of our abilities. While there are many challenges brought on by the global nature of caring for children, that same nature provides an unprecedented opportunity to work together to build a better future.

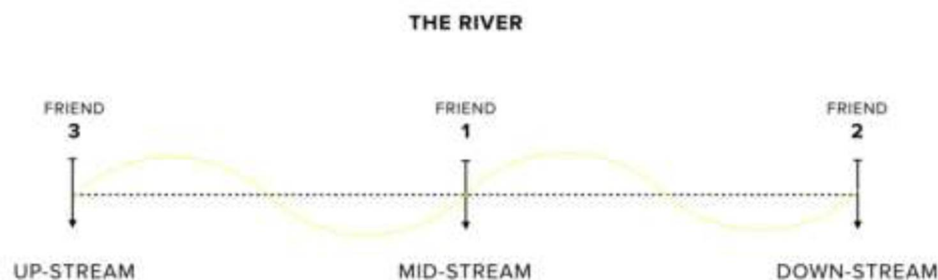
12. Implications for The Church

The Church can play a critical role by engaging thoughtfully in caring for children and families experiencing vulnerabilities. We don't all need to have the same role, but rather can work collectively to strengthen families and communities. Romans 12:4-5 writes that, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (*New International Version Bible*). We can understand this well through an analogy.

> Imagine three friends come upon a raging river. They see children in the water rushing down the rapids towards a waterfall. One friend immediately jumps into the river and begins pulling as many children out as he can. Knowing there's a waterfall downstream, the second friend runs down river and tries to catch as many children as he can before they fall to their deaths. The third friend, however, wonders why these children are in the river in the first place. He runs upstream to find out how these kids are getting thrown in and to stop whoever is doing it. All three friends are running in three different directions, but all of them are right and necessary places for them to engage in order to rescue as many kids as possible. Each address very different yet equally important points of the problem (see fig. 3) (Johnson).

Figure 3

The River



Source: Johnson, Jason. "Developing a Holistic Orphan Care Ministry in Your Church."

www.jasonjohnsonblog.com/blog/developing-a-holistic-orphan-care-ministry-culture.

We each have different strengths, so trying "to be or do something noble that has nothing to do with who [we are] … may look good to others and to [ourselves] for a while," but eventually it will unravel because we are trying to do something that is not in our nature (Palmer 47). Each individual's unique role is equally valuable and necessary.

We must also reevaluate what "Christian mission" means in the context of globalization. Bryant Myers, a professor of Transformational Development, writes that "Christian mission needs to be reimagined to include helping the people in the pews develop the eyes to see and ears to hear that will allow them separate what is true from what is not in the face of the fire hose of information, claims, and seductions they hear, see and experience every day in a globalized world" (Myers, *Engaging Globalization* 245-246). The Evangelical church can often be an isolated bubble where the popular trend is not questioned; the church that I grew up in never offered, or even mentioned, an alternative to orphanages or short-term mission trips, nor did it discuss whether these were effective or appropriate. The Church is a global entity with a global impact, so these actions must be evaluated in a global context. A critical role the Church can hold is helping to spread best practices and challenging old ideas. I want to see the Church engage in global issues with thoughtfulness, respect, and value. Jesus values family, and the Church has an opportunity to reflect that value by walking with families in need and prioritizing children *being* in families.

12.1 Embracing Intentional Relationship

Chapter two in the book of Job tells the story of how Job, having already experienced the loss of all his possessions and children, sat in pain, inflicted with sores from head to toe. Verses eleven through thirteen of Job read:

> Now when Job's three friends - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite - heard about all this adversity that had happened to [Job], each of them came from his home. They met together to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they looked from a distance, they could barely recognize him. They wept aloud, and each man tore his robe and threw dust into the air and on his head. Then they sat on the ground with him seven days and nights, but no one spoke a word to him because they saw that his suffering was very intense. (*Christian Standard Bible,* Job 2:11-13)

These men sat with Job, wept with him, and simply remained with him; they offered nothing but their presence. Living in a society that places a high value on productivity teaches us that friendship demands acts of service, that comfort means alleviating pain, and that time is a precious commodity that must not be wasted on doing nothing. I have come to recognize that all of my engrained ways of "comforting" those experiencing adversity are through alleviating pain and producing results. Job 2:10b confronts this by asking, "Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?" (*Christian Standard Bible*). I now realize that I have learned empathy backward; empathy, understanding and sharing the feelings of another, requires putting our agenda aside to feel someone's pain and walk *beside* them, just as Job's friends sat with him for seven days and nights. Relational change means walking "shoulder to shoulder" in a common direction (Lederach, *Reconcile* 57). The transformative power of love functions *in* relationship.

Safe Families for Children seeks to do exactly this: bring isolated families into community through relationship. I have been volunteering with Safe Families for Children for the last two years and have witnessed first-hand the impact relationship can have. Safe Families for Children is a nation-wide nonprofit that works to put church at the forefront of family preservation through direct relationship. My idea of "caring for the orphans" was always reactionary, but there is so much beauty in proactively engaging with families through relationship. Many of the families that Safe Families works with are experiencing homelessness, combatting substance abuse, or are socially isolated while facing crisis. The Church has the opportunity to step into these places and become family to families who have no one else.

For five days last summer, my husband and I hosted a little boy, through Safe Families, because his mom did not have anyone to watch him while she gave birth to his little sister. Prior to meeting the family, we had many ideas about who they would be and what they needed, yet we were honestly stunned when we met his parents. They were loving and snuggling him while we talked; they were kind, capable, and worried about being away from him. I was saddened that I had formed ideas of who they were, and as I sat there on their couch, I realized that their reality was far different than I had imagined. This is the beauty of relationship; we have no choice but to face our biases when we take the time to sit with people, see their lives, and hear their stories.

The Evangelical church's participation in caring for communities experiencing vulnerabilities has been primarily to provide relief, but what would these families tell us if we spoke with them? What heartache would they express? Would our actions be different if they were our friends? Our goal should be to "see things from their perspective in the hope that competing justices may become converging justices" (Volf 213). If we are to incorporate empathy into our compassion, we must be willing to invest ourselves, not just our money, in

intentional relationship and systemic change, because "where the neighbor suffers because of injustice, love will not simply bind up the wounds of the suffering. Love will seek to undo the injustice" (Moe-Lobeda 178). The first step in the process is "language that recognizes the dignity of us all. We need language that calls upon the responsibility of us all. We need to listen to the margins" (Wilson-Lyons 13:10-13:34). The people who trigger uncomfortability in us are the very people we should be moving *toward*.

When people came to Jesus, they brought what they thought was their immediate need, yet Jesus looked beyond the surface level and engaged with their deeper, true need. It takes more effort, time, and intentionality to expose and address the root of an issue, but I believe this is what we are called to if we are to imitate Jesus. As imperfect people, engaging with families can be messy because it involves the ever-changing dynamics of other imperfect people. It requires ongoing relationship and investment of time, presence, and heart, but this is what Jesus calls us into.

13. Precautions for Language

By consciously shaping our language to be accurate and respectful, rather than generalized, we can pursue well-informed action that addresses individual and systemic needs. As we move forward in being mindful of our language, we must do so with care and awareness.

My initial concern with researching the Church's "orphan care" language was that it would be labeled as an attempt to be politically correct and be written off. In the article "Why the Language of Poverty is a Sensitive Issue," Stephen Pritchard writes that "attempts to alter the language [of poverty] have been met with accusations of political correctness [PC], but it's interesting to note in relation to sexism and racism, for example, how terms that were once mocked as PC have been accepted and absorbed and brought with them new understanding and

tolerance" (Pritchard). Although my research initially focused on alternative language to the word *orphan*, I have concerns that new terms have the potential to create the same generalizations as the word *orphan*. I propose further research be done on new terminology that is accessible and accurate for both the Church and experts. Replacement of established language takes time, but it begins with the awareness and mindfulness I am presenting.

There are two precautions to note when discussing accurate language. First, we must take caution when assigning labels to groups of people because "applying new labels to a timeless problem veils the jagged reality with woolly language - often used to justify actions that directly harm those most in need. Words are the catalyst for action, and in positions of power we must employ them conscientiously" (Leclerc). We have seen this lesson reflected in the way that the label "orphan" has been applied broadly to millions of children who have families. To move forward, we need to be careful not to repeat the same mistake of concealing their circumstances with our labels. Second, our language must be approachable enough for anyone to understand, while at the same time still being accurate. Expert language that places *orphans* into multiple categories (single, double, social, etc.) is cryptic, specialized, and not well-understood by the general public, which explains why a simple, overarching term has been used by the Church. Ultimately, our goal should not be to correct or condemn those who use the term *orphan* incorrectly, but rather to ensure that we are representing children experiencing vulnerabilities with accuracy, care, and honor.

Part of representing a group of people with respect is speaking of them as people before the identifiers we place upon them. On the first day of my "Individuals with Disabilities in Society" class during undergraduate studies, my professor spoke about identity. She was a preschool teacher for children with autism and, seeing all the stereotypes her students faced

every day, the one thing she wanted us to take away from the class was learning to see people before their identity descriptors. This shift is as simple as referring to "children with autism" instead of "autistic children." When we refer to others by a label, it is easy to make assumptions about who they are and forget that they have their own individual stories, because "we undervalue people when we define them by their perceived deficits" (Bornstein and David 76). The label "becomes an identity marker" (Oswald) because they "are defined through [the] perception [of] others" (Holmes 136). In light of this, there needs to be awareness of how the word *orphan* affects the children wearing this label and what they believe of themselves. This small shift in our language forces us to humanize others and recognize how our labels affect the worth *we* place upon them and the worth *they* believe they have.

14. Conclusion

There is power in our words. Proverbs 18:21 tells us that "the tongue has power of life and death" (*New International Version*). The words that come out of our mouths can bring literal and spiritual life or death to others. They can encourage, betray, love, disrespect, affirm, or honor. Yet, how often do we pause to think about how our tongues impact the *life* of others, especially children and families experiencing vulnerabilities? If we truly believe that our tongues can speak life or death, we need to consider the impact of our words much more often, especially words so engrained that we have never stopped to think about them. We must stop to think about our words because "we are all deeply affected by them whether we're conscious of it or not. That makes us really vulnerable, but it also makes us incredibly powerful, because if words create worlds then different words can create a different world. Think of the possibilities. What are you going to say next?" (Wilson-Lyons 14:25-14:50). I want to live in a way that my words create a

world where children feel safe, cherished, respected, and know the love of Jesus through the love of family. What do you want your words to do?

Katrina,

This was a true joy to read-from start to finish. Your content, structure, research, and purposeful diction are worthy of a Master's level thesis. You have earned a High Pass and I do not require any additional edits. (And trust me, I went back to SEARCH for significant things you should fix…) I hope you are immensely proud of this work; it demonstrates not only your diligence throughout the coursework of your degree, but also your personal excellence as a scholar.

Thank you for being such a delightful student; it has been an honor to learn with you.

Dr. Witt

Resources for Your Curiosity

Books

1. Orphan Justice by Johnny Carr
   Orphan Justice is a great introduction book providing an overview of the many related issues to leading children to being vulnerable.

Websites

1. Lumos
   Established by author, J.K. Rowling, Lumos is working to educate the public on the harm of institutionalization. They supports communities as their children transition and are reunited and placed in families.

2. Faith to Action
   Faith to Action partners with faith-based communities, churches, and individuals to educate and equip them on the best practices for caring for vulnerable children.
   "The Faith to Action Initiative focused its outreach and resources on equipped churches and individuals with information and tools to support and guide action for orphans and other vulnerable children." ("Start Here")

Videos

1. Going on a short-term missions trip (vimeo.com/236674151)

2. Children Needs Families, Not Orphanages (youtube.com/watch?v=f7L1ceDjb5o)

Organizations

1. Abide Family Center

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