

Northwest University

Church. Community. Care.

Equipping the Local Church to Engage in Foster Care Support

Kiarra Cottman

Dr. Inslee

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The names of all interviewees have been changed to protect and respect their stories

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Introduction

423,997. That is the approximate number of children currently in foster care in the United States (“Foster Care”). That number represents children whose families have been torn apart, security has been stripped away, and trust has been tainted. The foster care system was designed to provide safe homes for children whose living situations were deemed unfit. Despite the good intentions of the system, being involved in foster care is not always easy. Due to the trauma of being removed from a home, kids in foster care often struggle with emotional regulation and behavior management which, in turn, can make foster parenting both challenging and isolating. The system also bears immense stigma, including the assumptions that all foster parents have corrupt motives and that all kids in care are unruly and rebellious. As a result, those involved in the foster care system are often misunderstood and lack essential community, resources, and support.

Throughout history, the church has played an integral role in caring for vulnerable children and families. In fact, at the core of Christian ideology is a mandate to advocate and care for “the least of these” (*New International Version*, Matt. 25.40). To uphold this sentiment, many churches engage in international mission endeavors, supporting children and families overseas. Although this work is valuable, there is a clear disconnect between the church and the local foster care community. Many American churches are simply unaware of the prevalence of foster families and have ministries that are ill-equipped to care for children who have experienced trauma. These actions are in direct opposition to passages in the Bible that emphasize the significance of caring for the orphaned and vulnerable and the importance of equipping children with a spiritual foundation. Engaging in foster care support is certainly not a simple task as it can

involve challenging behaviors and complicated family structures; however, the church has a clear opportunity and responsibility to provide support to this community.

Acknowledging the value of a partnership between the church and the foster care system, I created a handbook entitled: *Church. Community. Care.* designed to provide church leaders with the tools and resources needed to begin engaging in foster care support. It highlights topics such as the intricacies of the foster care system, the role of the local church, the impact of trauma, and the importance of community. Drawing from my fieldwork experience, the handbook was written to not only provide church leaders with an awareness of the foster care system but also to mobilize local congregations to take action in this sphere. To abide by the church's own core value of caring for orphaned and vulnerable children, church leaders must be equipped to support foster families in their communities. With an understanding of the foster care system, implementation of trauma-informed principles, and intentional partnership with foster families, the local church can make a tremendous impact in supporting those touched by foster care.

Background

Designed to provide children with safe homes, the foster care system plays a significant role in ensuring the well-being of orphaned and vulnerable children. The system "...involves temporarily bringing a child in need into one's family, with the ultimate goal of reunification with the child's birth family if and when it is safe to do so" (Hook et al. 224). Although necessary, involvement in foster care is often complex as it affects the safety and preservation of families. The system is unfortunately filled with complicated cases, overworked staff, and a lack of foster homes, which can be incredibly challenging to manage. Reflecting on the current state of the foster care system, Julie, a social worker, explained, "Even though the foster care system

provides support to countless children, there is little to no support provided to the system itself. Many children are left without care and workers are left without hope” (Julie). Due to her line of work, Julie is intimately familiar with the intricacies of the system and the challenges it presents. Her statement reveals the inherent lack of aid and encouragement that is provided to children, families, and workers in foster care. The clear need for support presents an undeniable opportunity for the church to get involved in this work.

Throughout history, the church has served as a primary advocate in caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. In fact, Schreiber notes, “Christians founded the first institutions that were focused on children—orphans—” (293). Committed to advocating for the well-being of children, the Christian church took intentional action to support and provide for those in need. The implementation of the foster care system, however, marked a significant shift, as it increased governmental involvement and essentially replaced the role of the church in this sphere. As a result, many churches have since become fairly disconnected from the foster care system as a whole (Collins and Scott). While interviewing two youth pastors, I posed the question, “On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your knowledge of the foster care system?” After taking a moment to reflect on their answers, both responded: “If I am being honest, probably a three” (Gary and Mikayla). Their responses are unfortunately indicative of the larger relationship between church leaders and the foster care system. The church serves as an integral source of community for believers and thus can help provide a safe space for those touched by foster care, yet there is often a lack of understanding of and involvement in foster care support in the Christian community. In “Ecological Disruptions and Well-Being among Children in Foster Care” Hindt and Leon explain, “The maintenance of spiritual community can serve as a protective factor for children in foster care” (41). Becoming involved in a church can be

incredibly beneficial not only to the children in care, but also to the families that care for them. Foster care support provides an opportunity for the church to take intentional action to provide a meaningful community and support system to vulnerable children and families.

Research Context

The content of this paper was derived from my fieldwork experience at a nonprofit called Foster the Family. The organization “...exists to support and encourage foster and adoptive families, mobilize and equip the community and church for foster care and adoption, and advocate for vulnerable children” (“Foster”). Foster the Family has branches in New Jersey, Washington D.C., Maryland, and Michigan and operates over fifty support groups nationwide. The organization is intentional about providing both immediate emergency support and long-term holistic care. Their FosterCare Package program provides foster families who are welcoming a new placement with a personalized package containing brand-new clothing, hygiene products, comfort items, a home-cooked meal, a note of encouragement, and informational resources. Without the stress of gathering these essential items, foster families can focus entirely on welcoming an incoming placement which increases the likelihood of a smooth transition into the home. They also offer focused support groups, community events, and Respite childcare that encourage and facilitate meaningful community. By engaging in these events during my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to gain a firsthand glimpse into the lives of children in foster care, the experiences of foster parents, and the role of foster care advocates.

Although Foster the Family maintains a gospel-centered mission, in speaking with the Director of Operations, I learned that gaining church support was one of the biggest challenges the organization faced (Jenny). To say I was shocked is an understatement. Caring for orphaned and vulnerable children is a clear value of the Christian church, yet the biggest challenge Foster

the Family faced was gaining church support? At first, I assumed she must be joking, but it soon became clear this was the unfortunate reality. As a result, I chose to focus my research on exploring the relationship between the church and foster care, as it presented an opportunity to address a current need. With this goal in mind, my fieldwork research was centered on exploring the following questions:

1. What is the current relationship between the church and the foster care system?
2. How could a partnership between the church and foster care benefit both parties?
3. What church ministries are already successfully engaging in foster care support?
4. What potential challenges does church foster care support present?
5. What tools can be used to help bridge this gap?

These questions provided a general framework for my fieldwork research and data collection.

While crafting the questions, I was intentional about researching this topic from the perspective of both foster parents and church leaders. My desire was to gain a well-rounded and informed view of both the current and desired model of church foster care support to devise an effective plan of action.

Research Methodology

I completed my fieldwork at Foster the Family from April to August of 2022. Within that timeframe, I conducted eleven interviews where I had the privilege of speaking with four foster parents, four church leaders, two former foster youth, and one social worker. Merriam and Tisdell note, “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (108). Since foster care is incredibly nuanced and unique to each family, conducting interviews allowed me to gain personal insight into the true perspectives and experiences of those involved in various aspects of the system. The interviews

were semi-structured and often led to unprompted and extended conversations. I found that this method was particularly beneficial to my research as it presented a safe space to share without inhibition. Rather than gaining a cliché or polished explanation of foster care, I was able to learn about “the beauty, the brokenness, and everything in between” (Bella). These stories were shared by individuals who are involved in various parts of foster care, which allowed me to gain a well-rounded and informed view of the system as a whole. The interviewees kindly provided me entrance into the true realities of foster care that I likely would not have discovered through the use of quantitative methods alone.

One unique aspect of my data collection was navigating how to approach understanding the experiences of children in foster care. Although their perspectives were crucial to the development of my research, given their young age and vulnerable status, formal approaches of data collection, such as interviews, would not have been appropriate. To maintain ethical integrity, I chose to devote over twenty-five hours to participant observation during childcare and community events to conduct informal research. These events provided me with the opportunity to interact with children in foster care, as well as observe their interactions with their families and the other children in care. Although much of the time was spent playing games, making crafts, and sharing laughs, these events allowed me to gain an understanding of how the children, “interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam and Tisdell 6). During my first night of childcare, I was introduced to the trauma responses, emotional deregulation, and complicated family structures that are common to many children in care. These observations provided me with a personal understanding of the impact of trauma and ultimately fueled my desire to understand, as “deep empathy for people makes our observations powerful sources of inspiration” (Bornstein 25).

While observing and interacting with the children, I gained an insightful glimpse into their experiences which further increased my desire to engage in support.

Although not the primary focus of my research, I also included aspects of appreciative inquiry in my data collection as well. In her book, *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, Hammond explains, “Appreciative Inquiry suggests that we look for what works in an organization; that we appreciate it” (5). Rather than focusing solely on the challenges of foster care, I also desired to highlight what was being done well and thus intentionally dedicated time to researching churches that are currently operating thriving foster care ministries and engaging in support efforts. I found that a common thread among each of the churches was an emphasis on the next generation. As revealed by their verbiage and ministry structure, these churches intentionally valued children and youth, highlighting the biblical role of the church to care for them. Pastor Chris, a Student Ministries Pastor, explained, “We believe that God has called His church to care for children. It is our duty to welcome the vulnerable, traumatized, hurting, and broken. The church is called to care for *all* children” (Chris). Echoing a similar sentiment, Brittany, the Chief Ministry Officer at a local church, explained that their church building was designed to have the same amount of space designated to both the adult and kids wings: “The layout of our building is a reflection of our belief that ministry to kids is just as important as ministry to adults. Our priority is providing a safe space for all kids, whether in traditional families or not, to build a relationship with Jesus” (Brittany). The importance of ministering to all children, regardless of family history, emotional hardship, or behavioral challenges, was a commonality among churches engaging in effective foster care support. Rather than simply donating money or occasionally supporting the cause, these churches are intentional about using

their space, time, and resources to accommodate all families. Implementing aspects of Appreciative Inquiry into my research allowed me to identify key positive traits in this work.

Reflexivity

In their text, *Fieldworking*, Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater encourage researchers to, "...ask how who you are affects how you understand yourself and your fieldwork" (115). The topic of church foster care support is particularly meaningful to me. In addition to my desire to support children in the foster care system and involvement with Foster the Family, I also work in Kids Ministry. I grew up in church, began volunteering at a very young age, and for the past three years have called ministry my full-time vocation. As a result, I had the unique role of approaching this topic through the lens of both a foster care advocate and a church leader. Although incredibly helpful, this dual perspective resulted in some uncomfortable, yet necessary introspection. While conducting research on the various ways that churches can support the foster care community, I was brutally confronted by the ways in which the ministry I lead can improve in this area. As a church leader, I am aware of how challenging it can be to train volunteers, introduce new systems, and shift service structures. These drastic changes can seem both intimidating and overwhelming; however, "we do not have to lead from a place of fear" (Palmer 93). Engaging in church foster care support is certainly not an easy task; however, it is both possible and necessary. Creating this handbook granted me the opportunity to use my current ministry experience to develop a resource that specifically caters to those in church leadership as well as those touched by foster care.

Although my field site was in New Jersey, a context I am very familiar with, the culture of the foster care community was quite foreign to me. During my fieldwork, I was quickly introduced to unfamiliar terms, unique behavioral needs, and complicated family structures I had

never previously been exposed to. Since I did not have any previous connection to the foster care system, these experiences were initially quite challenging for me to navigate. It felt as though there was a clear boundary separating me from those involved in foster care. Charles Vogl shares, “When there's a boundary, insiders feel more confident that they share values and that they understand one another better than outsiders” (33). Due to the unique experiences of those involved in the system, there is a bond shared among the community that is not often understood by outsiders. At the start of my fieldwork, my position as an outsider proved to be challenging; however, by remaining consistent and building relationships, over time I was able to gain a more of an emic perspective into the community. Through my conversations with foster parents, I was made aware of the backgrounds of the young children in their care. Their stories were often tragic and thus were emotionally challenging for me to grasp at times. Although being aware of the traumatic events endured by children in foster care is a necessary aspect of this work, Shockman notes that being inundated with such stories can result in secondary trauma (32). In addition, “Those dealing with trauma on a regular basis report that they are most vulnerable...when dealing with the pain of children” (Marchand 13). The emotional weight of hearing stories of children who have experienced trauma can have a significant impact on those providing care. Although challenging to process at times, this aspect of foster care must be understood to engage in effective support.

Contextualization

To create an effective and informative resource on church foster care support, taking contextualization into consideration is key. Contextualization is defined as, “The practice of designing programs and processes with attention to the particular cultural characteristics and inherent resources of a given people, place, and time” (Inslee). *Church. Community. Care.* was

curated to specifically address the unique culture and needs of both the Christian church and the foster care system. The handbook begins with a baseline overview of foster care and an introduction to the system. While writing the material, I was intentional about refraining from the use of typical foster care terminology, so comprehension of the content does not require any prior knowledge of or experience with foster care. I also included a glossary of terms and acronyms at the end of the handbook that church leaders can refer to when met with any language they are not familiar with. This format intentionally broadens the audience of the handbook and thus increases the scope of impact.

My initial plan was to create a lengthy manual that discussed the intricacies of foster care, answering every possible question in excessive detail. Although a resource like this could be beneficial, in my conversations with church leaders, I learned that due to the rigorous study schedule of most pastors, “long, drawn-out materials are often ignored or overlooked” amongst their slew of other responsibilities (Brittany). As a result, I designed *Church. Community. Care.* to be a short and easily digestible resource that explains all the pertinent information in a concise manner. The handbook content is not intended to be a strict guideline but rather a framework from which church leaders can curate a specific method of foster care support. Due to the varied availability of time, resources, space, and budget, each church will engage in foster care support differently. Some congregations may simply raise awareness of the foster care system while others may be able to engage in ongoing projects and implement service accommodations. Acknowledging the varying possibilities of implementation, the handbook provides numerous ideas for foster care engagement that church leaders can use to create a unique plan of action catered to the specific assets and needs of their community.

Although the target audience of this handbook is church leaders, it was also designed with foster parents in mind. During my fieldwork, I found that despite their desire for support and community, some foster parents have difficulty asking others for help. Since foster parents willingly choose to open their homes to vulnerable children, some feel as though the burden of fostering should be solely theirs to bear. In fact, Helen, a seasoned foster mom, explained, “I often feel like because I signed up for this, I should be able to handle it. If I didn’t want my life to be hard, I shouldn’t have become a foster parent. It’s my responsibility, not anyone else’s” (Helen). Because of this mentality, rather than asking for help, some foster parents simply resort to isolation, silently wrestling through the many challenges of fostering alone. As a result, their true needs and desire for support are often overlooked and misunderstood. Another foster and adoptive mom, Kate, noted that although she would love her church to support foster families, she does not feel comfortable initiating the conversation, fearing her request may be perceived as selfishly motivated. “It puts the church in an uncomfortable position” she explained, “I would be asking them to start something that would directly benefit my family” (Kate). Clearly, these stories reveal the unique challenges involved in asking for church support as a foster parent. *Church. Community. Care.* was intentionally designed to be “compatible with the cultural life world of all participants” (Stringer 75). The hope is that the format of the handbook helps to alleviate the discomfort of overtly asking for support and instead creates space for an open and meaningful dialogue between church leaders and those involved in foster care.

The Reality of Foster Care

Fear. Abandonment. Pain. Uncertainty. These are the emotions, 4-year-old Ashley experienced while being told the place she once called home was now deemed unfit for her residence. As a result of the drug use and neglect of her parents, Ashley and her two sisters were

removed from their home and placed in the foster care system. After one year of placement, parental rights were terminated, and the sibling group was adopted by a foster family. Although initially a safe environment, Ashley and her siblings became victims of physical and sexual abuse from two older children in the adoptive home. After four years of suffering in silence, Ashley reported the abuse to her caseworker who placed the children back in foster care. Unable to find a home willing to take all three girls, Ashley was separated from her sisters and placed all alone. Over the next eight years, she transitioned in and out of over fifteen foster homes, each one decreasing what little trust she had left. She experienced severe struggles with mental health, difficulty making and maintaining relationships, and was diagnosed with RAD, PTSD, and multiple eating disorders. After spending 2,852 days in the system, at age sixteen Ashley, was adopted by a single mother. Although not perfect, this foster/adoptive mom fully acknowledged the hardships of Ashley's past and embraced her with unconditional love. She became involved in a local church and cites her relationship with God as the reason she is still alive today (Ashley). Ashley's story is one of hundreds of thousands in the foster care system. Her experience sheds light on the reality of foster care and the benefit of support and community.

Despite the undeniable value of providing safe homes for vulnerable children, the foster care system is filled with brokenness, loss, and pain that cannot be ignored. Every child in the system has experienced the reality of living in an unsafe home, the challenging removal from everyone and everything they have ever known, and the daunting transition to living with complete strangers. As revealed by Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Child Development, the environment in which a child is raised significantly affects how the child grows and develops (Oswalt). At a very young age, children in foster care are forced to navigate incredibly complicated family dynamics while simultaneously assimilating to an entirely new

reality. Desiring to provide a safe space for such children, foster parents open their homes and become the legal guardians of vulnerable children they have just met. In addition, since the goal of foster care is ultimately to reunite the child with their family of origin once it is deemed safe, most foster placements are solely temporary (Hook et al. 63). As a result, foster parents live in a constant state of uncertainty. At any moment, a caseworker could call with news resulting in a child being removed or placed in the home in a matter of hours. To ensure the health and well-being of the children in care, foster parenting also includes navigating visits with the biological family, home studies, court cases, therapy sessions, etc. Managing not only the mental and emotional weight of foster care but also the various commitments and responsibilities involved can make foster parenting quite challenging and isolating. Although the system is necessary, “Every aspect of foster care is composed of equal parts good and bad, joy and sorrow, beauty and brokenness” (Johnson 78). Each child that is placed in the system represents a home that has been torn apart and a family that is no longer together. The act of providing children with safe homes is certainly beautiful, but that does not erase the underlying brokenness and pain that exists. Acknowledging this challenging dichotomy is essential to understanding the true reality of the foster care system.

In addition to the various legal, familial, and relational complexities of foster care, the system is also subject to an immense amount of stigma that can negatively affect both the families and kids in care. Due to media portrayals and news headlines, the prominent narrative surrounding children in foster care is that they are malicious, troubled, and volatile individuals. This perception, unfortunately, precedes children in the system and creates a reputation they often struggle to overcome. In his text, *Unclean*, Richard Beck notes, “Once an object is deemed to be contaminated there is very little that can be done to rehabilitate the object” (8). Sadly, this

experience is all too common for kids in care. Due to their involvement in the system, they are automatically seen as ‘damaged goods’ by individuals who cast premature judgment. This negative perception causes children in foster care to feel further ostracized in their already isolating circumstances. In addition, kids in care sometimes struggle to build relationships with and relate to their peers. They have endured traumatic experiences that can be challenging for children with ‘typical’ upbringings to understand. Without proper community and support, children from vulnerable backgrounds are more likely to experience, “...antisocial and destructive behavior, leading to poor relationships, school exclusion and conflict with the law” (“Child Poverty” 83). Clearly, negative perceptions and isolation can have significant effects on children in the system. While engaging in foster care support, churches must be aware of the stigma that exists and actively aim to create a new narrative.

Trauma Awareness

Understanding Trauma

Although often overlooked, trauma is an undeniably significant factor in the conversation surrounding church foster care support. Trauma is defined as “...the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences” (Onderko). As a result of simply being placed in the foster care system, all children in foster care have experienced trauma. The impact of traumatic events is displayed differently in every child; however, its presence remains the same. Thus, it is common for children in the foster care system to experience “nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety, aggressive behaviors, inability to regulate their emotions, etc.” (Hook et al. 224). These behavioral and emotional challenges are often a response to trauma the children have endured; however, they are commonly

misinterpreted as willful disobedience and intentional misbehavior. My conversation with Tiffany, a former foster youth, provided a unique perspective on this issue. Her story included being abandoned at a shelter by her birth mother, placed in over six homes in the span of four years, and abused at the hands of her caregivers. The internalized trauma from her troubling childhood resulted in a severe aversion to authority and difficulty controlling her emotions. As a result, she was often deemed the ‘problem child’ in church and was ostracized rather than given the tools she needed to succeed. She explained, “I wanted to be a good kid, but I just had so much anger and hate bottled up that I couldn’t control. No one took the time to know me, they just always told me how bad I was, so that’s who I became” (Tiffany). Rather than seeking to understand her story and help her navigate her challenging upbringing, the adults in Tiffany’s life simply added to her feelings of abandonment and shame. To provide a safe and nurturing ministry environment for individuals like Tiffany, church leaders must be equipped with an informed understanding of how to properly care for individuals impacted by trauma.

Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-Informed Care is a strengths-based approach to caring for individuals who have experienced trauma. The approach is designed to navigate “...the vulnerabilities or triggers of trauma survivors that traditional service delivery approaches may exacerbate so that these services and programs can be more supportive and avoid re-traumatization” (Streets 470). During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to attend an online training called Hope for the Journey. It was a 5-session program designed to provide foster parents, caregivers, and church leaders with Trauma Informed tools to effectively care for children impacted by trauma. The training explored topics such as felt safety, attachment, sensory needs, correcting principles, etc. It also provided practical tips for using language, behavior, and space to create an environment

that is conducive to the needs of individuals impacted by trauma. In the context of church ministry, a trauma-informed approach, "...seeks to sensitively use a basic understanding of trauma and reflect upon its implications for the various aspects of a religious ministry such as preaching, bible study, prayer, and other religious rituals and spiritual practices" (Streets 472). By implementing principles of Trauma-Informed Care, church leaders can be equipped to not only address trauma-related issues but also to engage in religious practices in a way that can be well-received by those with a trauma history.

Although the Christian church is often hailed as a place of healing, reconciliation, and growth, church leaders rarely receive the proper training needed to facilitate that environment. As a result, hurting and traumatized individuals who look to the church for support are sometimes met with "minimization, reductionism, blaming, and shaming" by church leaders who are ill-equipped to address the subject matter (Guiking 231). Although often well-intentioned, such interactions only exacerbate the existing trauma and may result in resentment toward the faith community as a whole. In his text, "Trauma-Informed Ministry," Robert G. Crosby III notes, "Churches have the potential to be places of healing for children who have experienced trauma, but ministry leaders and volunteers must prepare themselves to effectively meet this need and avoid re-traumatizing victims" (51). Clearly, Trauma-Informed Care can serve as the means by which church leaders can begin to effectively minister to those touched by the foster care system. Implementing these tools "...requires constant attention, caring awareness, sensitivity, and possibly a cultural change at an organizational level" ("Six"). Rather than continuing to abide by typical procedures, churches can proactively equip their staff with trauma-informed tools to provide necessary care to individuals navigating traumatic experiences.

Trauma-Informed Ministry

The implementation of Trauma-Informed principles can be particularly beneficial in the context of ministry to children. In addition to placing emphasis on learning Bible stories and memorizing Scripture, church leaders must also prioritize creating an informed and welcoming student ministry environment. In fact, “The more children feel safe and connected to the adults around them, the more they can learn to understand and regulate their emotions and behaviors” (Dombo 21). The tone of the ministry is ultimately set by the adults overseeing the service, thus equipping ministry leaders with knowledge of trauma-informed principles is essential to creating an inclusive space. Some children in foster care have experienced broken trust, abandonment, exploitation, abuse, etc. at the hands of adults tasked with caring for them. As a result, churches must be intentional about providing leaders and volunteers with training on how to effectively care for children who have endured such trauma. Although the ultimate goal of church ministry is to share the gospel, “churches wishing to promote a transformative kind of spirituality should...also be intentional about providing relational, rather than just instructional, opportunities for the children in their care” (Crosby et al. 252). Implementing principles of Trauma-Informed Care in student ministries acknowledges the need for relationship building and support in addition to biblical teaching and knowledge. By redefining the role and responsibilities of ministry leaders and volunteers, church services can further provide meaningful support to all children.

Although the typical structure of student ministries is sufficient for most children, it is not always conducive to the needs of those in foster care. In her text, “Deep in the Body: Neurodiversity and Embodied Knowledge in Youth Ministry,” Laura Cooke examines how youth ministries can diversify their teaching strategies to include individuals of all neuro-capacities, advocating for an inclusive ministry model (73). Most church services include a time

of teaching in which students are required to sit still and listen to the biblical content being taught. Although discussion of the Bible is an important aspect of church ministry, expecting children to remain quietly seated for an extended period is sometimes an unrealistic goal when dealing with kids impacted by trauma. Adjusting the service schedule to include elements such as group discussions, songs, visual aids, and movement breaks are all great ways to create a service that is conducive to all children. For children who may have additional needs, creating a sensory room or providing 1-on-1 care when necessary are also great options. By allowing opportunities for such adjustments, church leaders can help create services that effectively accommodate families involved in foster care and redefine engaging in “business as usual” (“SAMHSA”). To create a student ministry that is beneficial for children from all backgrounds, taking time to adjust the service structure and implement necessary accommodations is essential.

The Role of the Church

Founded on principles of compassion, love, and justice, the church is uniquely positioned to engage in foster care support. The core values of the Christian faith echo the importance of caring for vulnerable children and families. With over “380,000 churches in America” alone, Christian believers have the ability to make a significant impact in this sphere (Goshay). The church is known for being generous with its time, resources, and relationships, aiming to selflessly serve others. Due to the prevalence of such values, when asked about the importance of caring for vulnerable children, most church leaders would respond with resounding support; however, the lack of church involvement reveals “...catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction and Christian behavior” (Berry 306). While reflecting on this conflicting dichotomy I was reminded of Moe-Lobeda’s comments on the difference between moral deliberation and moral agency. In her text, *Resisting Structural Evil*, she explains, “The ‘deliberative dimension’

of ethics refers to processes of moral decision making, responding to the question of ‘what are we to do and be?’ ‘Moral agency’ on the other hand, refers to moral-spiritual power to ‘do and be’ what we discern we ought” (19). According to Moe-Lobeda, there is a clear difference between simply identifying morality and actively engaging in it. Although many church leaders inherently agree with the importance of caring for vulnerable children, their lack of understanding of and involvement in the system reveals a clear disconnect. Ultimately, “If the church really responded, we would solve the problem in our country” (Moore 3). Rather than continuing the cycle of inaction, church leaders must recognize their responsibility in caring for those touched by the foster care system and commit to making a change.

Lack of church support can unfortunately cause foster families to feel ostracized and misunderstood by the faith community. Bella, a foster mom and pastor’s daughter, provided unique insight into this reality. Her parents have been pastoring since she was seven years old, so she is intimately familiar with the intricacies of church ministry. Three years ago, she felt called to open her home as a foster parent and has fostered over ten placements in that time frame. When asked about church involvement in foster care support, she explained, “Even though my parents are the pastors, as a foster mom, I don’t feel supported by my church” (Bella). Although she knows the congregation prays for her, little else is done to support her through her fostering journey. She has never received a home-cooked meal, an offer to babysit, or even a shoulder to cry on. Foster care is completely disconnected from the mission of the church, leaving her, a foster mom, often feeling isolated and misunderstood. Unfortunately, Bella’s story depicts a common experience for many foster families. The church is promoted as a safe haven for the vulnerable, yet this local population is overlooked in many ministry contexts. By prioritizing

foster care support, church leaders can provide foster families with an opportunity to feel welcomed, valued, and supported by the church.

The language church leaders use to discuss foster care support can directly impact the effectiveness of their care. Historically, the Christian church has engaged in orphan care by hosting short-term mission trips, conducting service projects, or raising money to support orphanages overseas. Although these efforts can be beneficial, the verbiage used to describe the children in need of care can sometimes be problematic and “...inadvertently add to stigma and shame” (“Child Poverty” 58). Aiming to convey the severity of the need and increase involvement, churches often use statements such as ‘These poor kids need your help’ or ‘Your donation can save a child.’ This language creates a dichotomy in which the child is viewed as an “object of compassion” rather than a “full subject of their rights” (Miles and Wright 83). Unfortunately, if not properly addressed, this same approach can be applied to children in foster care. Children in the system are not simply helpless beings in need of rescuing, they are individuals with thoughts, opinions, and stories that should be considered and respected. Recounting her personal experience growing up in church, Ashley, a former foster youth, explained that she was often treated like a charity project. Many of the congregants referred to her as ‘the girl in foster care’ and would seemingly only address her out of pity or obligation. “I never knew who truly cared about me” she explained, “or who just wanted to be seen as a good Christian” (Ashley). Congregants rarely engaged in conversations with her that did not somehow lead back to her family struggles and end with an offer for prayer or money. Although likely well-intentioned, these interactions caused Ashley to feel as though church members saw her solely as an opportunity to display altruism rather than as an individual worth getting to know.

To avoid this unhealthy dichotomy, church leaders must be intentional about creating a culture that values children in foster care beyond their involvement in the system.

Biblical Basis

The Bible serves as the guidebook by which Christians conduct their lives, thus its emphasis on caring for the orphaned and vulnerable should be deeply considered in the conversation surrounding church foster care support. Orphan care is a key theme that is evident throughout Scripture as both a characteristic of God and a command for believers. In Psalm 65:8, God refers to Himself as the “Father to the fatherless” and Isaiah 1:17 commands the church to “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause” (*New International Version*). These passages clearly emphasize the heart of God for the orphaned and vulnerable. Although not all children in foster care are orphans, in the traditional sense of the term, they are separated from their families and are experiencing life in an unfamiliar context and thus share similar vulnerabilities. Foster care presents an opportunity for the church to respond to the biblical commands of orphan care in modern context. In his text, “Welcoming Children into Our Homes: A Theological Reflection on Adoption,” Waters highlights the inextricable link between Christianity and foster care acknowledging that “...foster care bears witness to the agape or caritas that lies at the heart of Christian faith in which God calls us to extend hospitality to strangers” (432). Foster care is a reflection of the unconditional and compassionate love displayed by God that Christians are tasked to share with others. Church engagement in foster care support is not only beneficial to the vulnerable children and families in the system but also provides an opportunity for Christian believers to abide by the commands presented in Scripture.

Hailed as the Son of God and the Savior of the world, Jesus is an incredibly prominent figure in the Christian faith. His life, as chronicled throughout the Bible, is the foundation upon which the Christian church was built. Thus, the way in which Jesus interacted with vulnerable populations is incredibly significant to the topic of church foster care support. Hook notes, "In his actions, Jesus modeled loving service for the least of these.....and, importantly to the present discussion on orphan care, Jesus was a safe place for children" (223). Rather than following the example of religious leaders who intentionally avoided individuals who did not meet the lawful standards of holiness, Jesus sought out the sick, broken, and hurting people in society and aimed to provide them with hope and healing. He did not overlook their need for support and instead willingly gave of his time and resources to provide the necessary aid. In addition, Jesus prioritized caring for children. He welcomed them, esteemed their faith, and emphasized their value. In their text *Every Child Welcome*, Wetherbee and Philo note:

Jesus set a high standard when He said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' The call is not limited to children who will sit quietly at His feet and listen, who color between the lines, who raise their hands and wait to be called upon, and who work at grade level. (423)

Through both His words and actions, Jesus welcomed and cared for all individuals, including those who were often overlooked and misunderstood. He created a space in which children could feel safe and commune with Him regardless of their background, temperament, or upbringing.

Jesus set a clear example of the importance of intentionally caring for the least of these.

Despite the biblical emphasis on providing support to the vulnerable, many churches are simply not designed to accommodate vulnerable populations. In his text, "Creating a Culture of Adoption and Orphan Care in the local church," Randall Burns notes, "...it is not always easily

discernible the ways in which a local congregation should serve. Also, leaders may not always be aware of the best strategies to use or how to use the existing strategies to their fullest potential” (117). Although the Bible does reference the value of orphan care, understanding its application in modern context can be challenging. If church leaders are not personally connected to the system, they might simply be unaware of the presence of foster care in their community and thus not know how to provide support; however, “concern for children can unite communities in ways that other issues cannot” (“Child” 2). Raising awareness of the ways in which the church can help care for vulnerable children in their community can spur church leaders to take action in this sphere. With an understanding of foster care, information on Trauma-Informed Care and practical ways to support foster families, the Christian church can be better equipped to abide by the biblical commands regarding orphan care.

Christian Values

Pro-Life Stance

Although seemingly insignificant, the topic of abortion is a crucial factor in the conversation surrounding church foster care support. On June 24th, 2022, the Supreme Court made the monumental decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark case surrounding abortion rights (Rzepka et al.). The Pro-Life vs. Pro-Choice argument is deeply polarizing with strong opinions on both sides of the issue. The recent verdict has undeniably amplified the relevance of this conversation. Although not a topic I initially planned to research, abortion was mentioned in almost every fieldwork interview I conducted. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater write, “While it is critical to prepare for an interview with a list of planned questions...it is equally important to follow your informant’s lead” (220). Aware of the intense emotions and opinions that surround this topic, I was incredibly wary of discussing such a sensitive subject; however, my

conversation with Julie, a social worker, revealed its importance. When asked why Christians should engage in foster care support, she explained, “Christians are so quick to celebrate Roe v. Wade being overturned but disappear when it’s time to care for the unwanted children that are born as a result” (Julie). Due to her involvement in social work, Julie is well-acquainted with the foster care system. She has heard the heartbroken cries of mothers who are unable to care for their children and has seen the grieving tears of foster youth longing for a place to call home. As revealed by its public support of pro-life policies, the Christian church strongly advocates for protecting vulnerable children in the womb, emphasizing that they are made in God’s image and thus have inherent worth. These same vulnerable unborn children are still in need of protection and support after birth. Children who are born to families that are unable or unwilling to care for them often end up in the foster care system, thus, the lack of church involvement in foster care support is quite surprising. The emphasis that the Christian church places on caring for vulnerable children in the womb arguably reinforces the significance of churches caring for vulnerable children in foster care.

Spiritual Development

Providing children with a strong spiritual foundation is a key value of the Christian faith. In fact, Proverbs 22:6 states “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (*New International Version*). One of the primary roles of church leaders is to equip children with an understanding of spiritual truths. Due to their trauma history, many children in foster care struggle with understanding the role of religion and spiritual development. “Why would I want God to be my father, when my biological father abandoned me?” Tiffany, a former foster youth questioned, “How can I trust that He truly wants what is best for me? Or that He won’t take advantage of me?” (Tiffany). Crucial elements of the Christian

faith such as unconditional love, forgiveness, and trust, can often be hard to grasp by children who have experienced immense betrayal, abandonment, and pain. By engaging in foster care support, church leaders have the opportunity to invest in the spiritual development of children who otherwise might reject or overlook the gospel message. A study conducted by Robert G. Crosby III and Erin I. Smith found that "...when children experience their church as friendly, responsive, and loving, they are more likely to perceive God as being close and responsive as well" (251). The actions and attitudes of those in the church can greatly affect how children approach spirituality as a whole. Rather than ostracizing children in foster care and potentially contributing to their spiritual indifference, the church can intentionally facilitate an environment that encourages positive spiritual development for individuals from all backgrounds.

Effective Methods of Care

Although fostering is an undeniably crucial aspect of foster care support, there are many other ways congregants can partner in this mission. When approached with the subject of foster care support, most people assume becoming a foster parent is the only way to get involved. As a result, families that are zealous to make a difference often rush to open their homes and quickly become overwhelmed and burnt out, questioning how they were so underprepared for the task at hand. These families often have to disrupt placements and find themselves feeling resentful and disappointed in the entire process. On the other hand, families who recognize their inability to foster due to the time, space, and resources it requires, often feel they have no other way to contribute and thus resort to inaction. Both of these approaches result in children in foster care not being supported and well-intentioned families feeling frustrated by and disconnected from the foster care system. Recognizing this unfortunate trend, the handbook *Church. Community. Care.* does not specifically address the topic of foster parenting. It was intentionally designed to

provide church leaders with various ways to support children in foster care outside of simply encouraging their congregants to become foster parents. In his book, *Everyone Can Do Something*, Jason Johnson notes, “Not everyone is called to become a foster parent, but everyone is called to act” (58). Foster parenting is not the right fit for all families, in fact, if pursued by the wrong families it can have disastrous outcomes; however, everyone can do something to care for children in the system.

In addition to providing an overview of the foster care system and suggested service accommodations, the handbook, *Church. Community. Care* outlines ways in which churches can actively support foster parents in both their congregation and community. Churches often have a budget for missions and charity efforts as well as a facility that can be utilized for ministries and events. Creating a Resource Closet, organizing a Meal Ministry, offering Respite Childcare, and Writing Notes of Encouragement are all great ways churches can use their resources to support local foster families. When children enter foster care they are often placed in a home with short notice and are seldom able to bring sufficient clothing, shoes, hygiene products, comfort items, etc. to the foster home. As a result, the foster family is tasked with rushing around to acquire the necessary items amidst the responsibilities of preparing to welcome a new child into the home. Churches can help address this issue by creating a Resource Closet filled with brand-new essential items that are made available to foster parents free of charge. Organizing a Meal Ministry is another helpful way to provide practical care, as preparing and delivering a homecooked meal can help alleviate some of the stress that accompanies welcoming a new foster placement. Acknowledging the importance of rest, offering Respite Childcare can provide foster parents with an opportunity to run errands, grab a meal, or simply take a nap for a few hours without the responsibility of caring for their children. Churches can help provide both the space

and volunteers needed to host Respite Childcare events. The role of a foster parent can, at times, feel quite isolating; thus, the simple act of writing notes of encouragement is an easy way to let foster parents know how valued and supported they truly are. Although seemingly insignificant, each of these methods of care helps create a community of meaningful support and care for those touched by the foster care system.

Handbook Implementation

Distribution

The target audience of *Church. Community. Care.* is church leaders, thus each of the handbook distribution strategies is centered upon making the material available to them. The content can be processed in both digital and print formats which will hopefully increase the accessibility and reach of the material. Here are three primary distribution methods:

1. Church Leaders

- The content of the handbook is designed for church leaders; thus, the most direct distribution approach is to send *Church. Community. Care.* to local churches in the community. This method would alleviate the need for a ‘middle-man’ and would provide church leaders with direct access to the handbook material. Some leaders may appreciate the opportunity to sort through the content and learn about foster care support at their own pace rather than at the request of someone else.

2. Foster Parents

- Since foster parents are the primary recipients of foster care support, providing them with copies of *Church. Community. Care.* to present to church leaders may also prove to be beneficial. The handbook can serve as a conversation starter for foster parents who may be longing for support but struggle to ask for help. In

addition, a church leader who is approached by a foster parent may be more inclined to get involved in foster care support than one who simply receives a package in the mail. Foster parents provide a tangible example of the relevance of the handbook material and the personal impact of foster care support.

3. Foster Care Workers/Advocates

- Although not actively fostering, individuals who work in or advocate on behalf of the foster care system are well acquainted with the complexities of fostering and are often exposed to the brokenness it entails. Social workers, resource workers, case managers, CASAs, etc. can also help advocate on behalf of church foster care support. By providing these individuals with copies of *Church. Community. Care.* they can present it to their church leaders or to those who are well-connected to the church to hopefully initiate a conversation about involvement in foster care support.

These methods present various opportunities for *Church. Community. Care.* to be made accessible to church leaders. The hope is that by implementing all three of these distribution approaches, the handbook will be able to reach the widest audience while forming the most meaningful connections.

Measurements of Success

The handbook *Church. Community. Care.* was designed to provide a general outline of foster care support rather than a prescriptive method; thus, the process of implementing the material will vary depending on the church and community in which it is being used. Although measuring the exact success of the handbook may be challenging to quantify, there are certain external factors that can help determine its overall impact:

1. The number of foster families that attend the church
 - Due to the negative stigma and challenging behaviors that are often associated with foster care, many foster parents are hesitant to attend a church that does not provide an inclusive and accommodating environment. Once a church is deemed a safe space for foster families, it often becomes a hub that many foster families begin attending. Analyzing the number of foster families that now attend the church may serve as a helpful indication of the successful implementation of the material presented in the handbook.
2. Ministry Adjustments
 - The current model of ministry is not always conducive to the needs of children and families impacted by trauma. The section of the handbook entitled “Trauma-Informed Church” discusses this concept in detail, highlighting various ways churches can adjust their service structure to create an inclusive environment. In addition, the handbook includes examples of how the church can address the practical needs of foster families in their congregation and community. Analyzing the implementation and effectiveness of these practices can also serve as a helpful measurement of success.
3. Partnership with external foster care organizations/advocates
 - Relationship building is a key component of engaging in foster care support. Each community has a child welfare office that oversees the intake and placement of children in the foster care system as well as various nonprofits and organizations that aid in further supporting foster families. A relationship with these local organizations can be cited as evidence of the expanding impact of church support.

Each of these factors represents tangible goals church leaders can strive toward in their foster care journey. These points do not encompass every unique measurement of success but instead can be used to provide an overarching guide.

Conclusion

Being involved in church foster care support is certainly not a simple task. Engaging in this work will require churches to provide additional training and accommodations, invite complicated family structures and behaviors into services, and place additional responsibility on the staff and volunteers. Acknowledging the work required, Randall Burns notes, "...orphan care is often difficult, and the church should be honest in discussing those difficulties when preparing people to engage" (117). Rather than creating a romanticized view of this work, it is imperative to acknowledge the many challenges that accompany supporting vulnerable children and families. The sheer amount of time and effort required for these adjustments may make involvement seem unreasonable; however, "we [Christians] are called to swim against the stream, at personal cost, and without expectation of understanding and appreciation" (Cobb 121). According to the commands presented in Scripture, the life of a Christian is not supposed to be easy, in fact, there is repeated emphasis on sacrifice and selflessness. Clawson notes that the church was designed to be a safe haven for broken families and hurting people regardless of the cost (186). Recognizing the many challenges of foster care, Jamie Finn, author of *Foster the Family*, poses a poignant question, "...do you want to know why foster care is worth it? Because it's gospel work. And living for Jesus is always worth it" (47). The process of engaging in church foster care support will certainly require intentional time, effort, and resources; but it ultimately provides Christians with an opportunity to abide by Biblical principles, follow Jesus' example of servanthood, and intentionally care for the vulnerable.

Children and families impacted by foster care are in need of support and the Christian church is uniquely positioned to help provide the necessary aid. The foster care system is home to vulnerable children and broken families that would greatly benefit from the community, resources, and support the church has to offer. This work directly aligns with the mission and values of the faith and thus presents a clear opportunity to provide meaningful care. Recognizing the immense impact the church can make in this sphere, Jason Johnson writes, “Your church has the ability to make a significant difference in the lives of vulnerable children and families. The questions are not ‘can’ you or ‘should’ you, but ‘how’ can you and ‘what’ does that need to look like?” (Johnson). *Church. Community. Care.* was designed to provide an overarching framework for church leaders who desire to engage in foster care support but are not sure where to start. My hope is that the content of the handbook helps prompt conversations surrounding church foster care support and equips church leaders with the tools and resources needed to effectively take action in their local contexts.

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Appendix A: Church. Community. Care. Handbook

**CHURCH.
COMMUNITY.
CARE.**

A CHURCH GUIDE TO FOSTER
CARE SUPPORT

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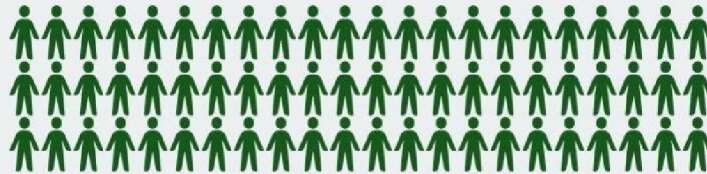
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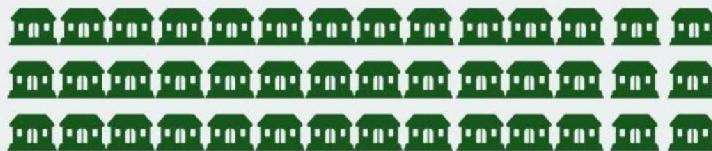
423,997

KIDS ARE IN FOSTER CARE IN THE U.S.



380,000

CHURCHES EXIST IN THE U.S.



YOUR
CHURCH
CAN MAKE A
DIFFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is designed to provide church leaders with a step-by-step guide on how to effectively engage in foster care support.

Your church has a unique opportunity to support vulnerable children and families in your local context. My hope is that by reading this text you will gain a deeper understanding of the foster care system and a passion to make a difference in your community!

SECTION I: OVERVIEW OF FOSTER CARE

"But do you want to know why foster care is worth it? Because it's gospel work. And living for Jesus is always worth it"

JAMIE C. FINN

FOSTER CARE

WHAT IS IT?

- Foster Care is a governmental system designed to provide safe housing for children whose living situations were deemed unfit for their residence.

WHY IS IT NECESSARY?

- Rather than relying solely on institutionalized care or leaving children to fend for themselves, the foster care system is designed to ensure that every child has adequate housing and support.

WHO IS INVOLVED?

- There are numerous entities involved in the foster care system such as the birth family, the foster family, the child welfare agency, the social worker, the caseworker, the judge, etc.

HOW DO KIDS END UP IN CARE?

- The exact details vary depending on the case, but it often begins with a report of suspected abuse or neglect. An investigation will be opened on the home to determine whether or not the situation is safe. Based on the results of the investigation, a judge will then decide if the child should be removed from the home.

IMPACT OF CARE

Although the foster care system is necessary, being in care is not always easy. Every child in the system has experienced the trauma of living in an unsafe home, transitioned to living with complete strangers, and is susceptible to developing triggers. The full impact of being involved in foster care must be taken into consideration to provide effective support.

TRAUMA

As a result of being placed in the system, all children in foster care have experienced trauma. The impact of traumatic events is displayed differently in every child, but its presence remains the same.

TRANSITION

The process of entering into foster care requires leaving one's home of origin and living with strangers. Children in foster care often have multiple placements resulting in repeated experiences with transition.

TRIGGERS

Due to the trauma they have experienced, certain sounds, smells, locations, etc. may trigger a seemingly abnormal physical or emotional response from a child in foster care.

STIGMA

Foster Care is unfortunately subject to an immense amount of stigma. These perspectives often wrongly shape the way foster families are viewed and understood.

**"ALL KIDS
IN FOSTER
CARE ARE
BAD"**

This mentality is often perpetuated by the media's portrayal of kids in foster care as explosive, ruthless, apathetic troublemakers. Although some children in care do struggle with such issues, those traits do not define every child. This view is unfair and damaging to children who may be immediately perceived as "bad kids" simply because they are in foster care.

**"ALL FOSTER
PARENTS
ARE IN IT
FOR THE
MONEY"**

When a foster parent accepts a child into their home, they are provided a stipend of money to care for the child. Although some corrupt individuals may accept foster placements solely for financial gain, this negative generalization completely discredits foster families whose motives for being involved in foster care are entirely well-intentioned.

**"ALL BIRTH
PARENTS
ARE EVIL"**

Birth parents are often perceived as individuals who maliciously abandoned their children or put them in harm's way. There are certainly instances where that is the case, but this topic is far more nuanced. Some birth parents find themselves in challenging circumstances where placing their child in a different home may be the best option for them. Demonizing birth parents is not always justified or fair.

OUTCOME OF CARE

Foster Care is a nuanced system that can have a variety of outcomes depending on the case, those involved, and the decisions of the court.

REUNIFICATION

The primary goal of foster care is to reunite children with their birth families. If the birth family is able to take the necessary steps to prove that they can provide a safe home environment for the child, the court may order the child to be reunified with their birth family.

KINSHIP PLACEMENT

Since remaining with the birth family is often the ideal situation for many children, if the biological parents are not fit to care for the child, the next best option is typically to be placed with another relative in the family. This process is called kinship placement.

ADOPTION

If the court rules that the biological parents are unfit to care for the child, they will terminate parental rights, meaning the child is now legally free to be adopted. If there are no eligible kinship placements, the goal of the child's case will switch to adoption to find a permanent home for the child.

AGING OUT

If a child is unable to reunite with their birth family, does not have a willing kinship placement, or does not want to be adopted, they will remain in the system until they age out. Once they are a legal adult they are no longer a part of the foster care system.

SECTION II: CHURCH INVOLVEMENT

"It is clear that caring for and meeting the needs of orphans is a consistent theme throughout the Christian scriptures. Similarly, caring for the orphan is modeled in the daily life of the nation of Israel, the life of Jesus, and the practices of the early church"

JENNIFER M. HOOK ET AL.

CHURCH INVOLVEMENT

HISTORY

- The Christian Church has always been a primary advocate for vulnerable children. In fact, Christians were the first group to provide homes to children in need by creating orphanages.
- The development of the formal child welfare system increased governmental involvement which, over time, essentially replaced the role of the church.

CURRENT NEED

- Although not "orphaned" in the traditional meaning of the word, children in foster care are separated from their birth parents and thus are susceptible to numerous challenges and vulnerabilities.
- Foster care support presents an incredible opportunity for churches to care for vulnerable children and families in their local context. To do so, churches must be equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to create an inclusive ministry environment.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT

The Bible is clear about the importance of caring for the orphaned and vulnerable. In fact, at the core of Christian ideology is a mandate to advocate and care for “the least of these.” Orphan care in modern America certainly differs from that of antiquity; however, foster care serves as a practical way to abide by these biblical commands in modern context.

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"

PSALM 68:5-6

"A **FATHER TO THE FATHERLESS**, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in **FAMILIES**"

ISAIAH 1:17

"Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. **TAKE UP THE CAUSE OF THE FATHERLESS**; plead the cause of the widow"

JESUS' EXAMPLE

During His time on Earth, Jesus repeatedly demonstrated the importance of caring for the vulnerable. He went out of His way to support and encourage those who were troubled, rejected from society, and left without hope. Engaging in foster care support is an incredible way for churches to actively follow Jesus' example.

"In his actions, Jesus modeled loving service for the least of these...

- John 6: Jesus fed the hungry
- Matthew 8: Healed the sick
- Matthew 23: Opposed unfair religious structures
- Matthew 21: Uprooted unjust financial structures
- John 8: Protected the safety and rights of women

...and, importantly to the present discussion on orphan care, Jesus was a safe place for children"

JENNIFER M. HOOK ET AL.

"Jesus set a high standard when He said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.' The call is not limited to children who will sit quietly at His feet and listen, who color between the lines, who raise their hands and wait to be called upon, and who work at grade level"

WETHERBEE AND PHILO

CHRISTIAN VALUES

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

- The Bible is clear about the importance of providing children with a strong spiritual foundation. By creating an environment that is conducive to foster families, churches can provide children (who otherwise may not have access to the gospel) with an opportunity to develop a relationship with Jesus.

PRO-LIFE STANCE

- A key tenet of the Christian faith is the value of human life. As a result, Christian churches often maintain a pro-life stance. If churches desire to protect vulnerable children inside of the womb, they should arguably take action to protect vulnerable children outside of the womb as well.

MISSIONS EMPHASIS

- Engaging in missions is a key component of Christianity. To abide by this value, many churches support international endeavors, host missions teams, and fund overseas initiatives. Although these efforts are important, serving foster families is an opportunity to engage in missions in your local context.

SECTION III: TRAUMA-INFORMED CHURCH

"Churches have the potential to be places of healing for children who have experienced trauma, but ministry leaders and volunteers must prepare themselves to effectively meet this need and avoid re-traumatizing victims"

ROBERT G. CROSBY III ET. AL

TRAUMA

WHAT IS IT?

- "Trauma is the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, diminishes their sense of self and their ability to feel the full range of emotions and experiences" (Onderko)

WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

- Trauma can occur in a variety of ways. From negligence to repeated acts of abuse - any form of emotional, physical, or mental harm can result in trauma.

HOW DOES IT AFFECT CHILDREN?

- Childhood trauma is incredibly impactful as it shapes the lens through which the child sees the world. It can result in struggles with trust, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, addiction, toxic relationships, behavior management (etc.)

HOW DOES IT RELATE TO FOSTER CARE?

- Kids in foster care have all experienced trauma. The act of removing a child from their home with limited belongings and sending them to live with complete strangers is inherently a traumatic experience.

TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

Trauma-Informed Care is a series of principles and actions that can be implemented to effectively care for individuals who have experienced trauma. Church ministries can utilize principles of Trauma-Informed Care to ensure that foster families are effectively supported in a church context.

This section will explore 4 ways churches can implement trauma-informed principles in student ministries:

Behavior Management
Accommodations
Service Structure
Language

BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

Due to the trauma that kids in foster care face, they may struggle with behavior management. Displaying negative behaviors is often an attempt to convey a deeper emotion rather than simply acting in defiance. To create a safe ministry environment, there are certain tools you can use to address disruptive behaviors in student ministry services:

- Maintain a calm tone of voice
- Try to diffuse the situation by redirecting the child's attention
- Explain why the child's behavior was inappropriate
- Provide alternative responses for next time
- Avoid placing children in time-out
- Avoid giving corrections in front of other children
- Do not use physical force (*unless the safety of others is at risk*)

**"EVERY BEHAVIOR IS
A COMMUNICATION
OF AN UNMET NEED"**

DR. KARYN PURVIS ET AL.

ACCOMODATIONS

LIGHTS/SOUNDS

Flashing lights and loud sounds may be triggering to children who have experienced trauma. Be cautious when including these elements in services.

SENSORY ROOM

Designating a separate space that caters to various sensory needs can help children who may get overstimulated by a typical ministry environment.

ACCOMODATIONS

Providing opportunities for children to color during service or take a walk in the hallway may help address varying behavioral needs.

1 ON 1 SUPPORT

Assigning volunteers to provide 1 on 1 support to children in need of additional assistance can ensure all children are properly cared for.

FIDGET TOYS

Fidget toys can provide kids with an opportunity to release energy and focus during service.

SERVICE STRUCTURE

The way student ministry services are structured can heavily affect the learning experiences of children impacted by trauma. Here are some simple suggestions to help address varying needs:

OBJECT LESSONS

- Object Lessons are a great way to portray abstract spiritual concepts in a way that all kids can grasp and remember. Using these tools can help children of all ability levels understand the Bible Story or Spiritual Truth being taught.

SMALL GROUPS

- Some children may have a hard time processing in a large group setting, so breaking into small groups and engaging in peer-driven dialogue can be helpful for both comprehension and relationship building.

TIME FRAMES

- Be aware of how long each element of the service takes. Avoid having kids sit quietly for long periods of time. Instead, include songs, games, videos, and activities to allow movement and sensory output during the service.

VISUAL/AUDIO ELEMENTS

- Incorporating visual pictures and sounds can help your service come to life. For children who may have difficulty processing spoken words, these supplementary tools can help them pay attention and grasp the concepts.

LANGUAGE

Words are very important. Here are some simple substitutions that can help make your student ministry more inclusive to children with nontraditional families:

PARENT

Using the term "guardian" or "adult" can be more inclusive to families that do not include traditional parents.

MOTHER'S DAY FATHER'S DAY

Use caution on these dates. Avoid content focused solely on mothers and fathers. Consider shifting focus to acknowledge all significant male/female figures.

HOLIDAYS

Be careful to not assume that all children received an abundance of new toys or an extravagant celebration with family on holidays. Acknowledge it may be a hard time.

CHILDHOOD

Use caution when discussing a child's upbringing. Do not assume that all children have experienced a positive childhood. Be sensitive to the stories of all of the children.

SECTION IV: CHURCH PARTNERSHIP

“Your church has the ability to make a significant difference in the lives of vulnerable children and families. The questions are not ‘can’ you or ‘should’ you, but ‘how’ can you and ‘what’ does that need to look like?”

JASON JOHNSON

CHURCH PARTNERSHIP

In addition to providing support to children in foster care during student ministry services, your church has an opportunity to engage the entire congregation in an ongoing partnership.

Churches are uniquely positioned to provide practical care and support to those touched by foster care. Here are a few areas of focus that can help create this partnership:

- **Raise Awareness**
- **Take Action**
- **Build Community**

RAISE AWARENESS

One of the primary reasons people do not engage in foster care support is that they are simply unaware of the need. Foster care is unfortunately not openly discussed in many Christian communities, thus intentionally raising awareness of the foster care system is a great way churches can partner with the mission.

STAND SUNDAY

Stand Sunday is held on the 2nd Sunday in November. On this date, churches nationwide acknowledge the needs of vulnerable children and families in their communities who are touched by the foster care system. This day can be used to raise awareness, serve local foster families, host meaningful events, etc.

NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

May is National Foster Care Month. This month presents an incredible opportunity for your church to highlight foster families and workers for their role in providing safe homes for children. This can help build a community for those already involved and provides a resource for those interested in learning more.

HIGHLIGHT FOSTER FAMILIES

Acknowledging foster families in your congregation is the most personal way to raise awareness. Your congregation physically sees and interacts with these families every week. By highlighting their stories, the mission becomes personal and provides a tangible example of the importance of the work.

BUILD COMMUNITY

HOST EVENTS

Hosting events such as Family Fun Day, Support Groups, Mentorship Programs, and Parent Trainings are all great ways to provide meaningful care to foster families in your congregation and community.

CHILD WELFARE OFFICE

Child welfare offices oversee all of the foster care placements in a given district. Dropping off baked goods or sending short notes of encouragement to the office workers is a great way to build relationships and show appreciation. Having this partnership will help aid the church in engaging in foster care support.

LOCAL NONPROFITS

There are many nonprofits working to support those impacted by foster care. Helping sponsor an event or organizing a volunteer team creates opportunities to serve foster families outside of your immediate congregation.

SERVING OPPORTUNITIES

MEAL MINISTRY

- Providing foster families with a home-cooked meal, allows the foster parents to focus on welcoming a child into their home without the stress of needing to prepare a meal. Your church can aid in creating a team to help make and distribute these meals.

RESOURCE CLOSET

- Due to the fact that children placed in foster care are often only able to take a limited amount of belongings, creating a Resource Closet of new clothing, hygiene products, comfort items, toys, etc. for kids in foster care can be incredibly meaningful.

CHILDCARE

- Being a foster parent can often be quite overwhelming. Providing a night of free childcare with trauma-trained volunteers can be a huge blessing for foster families.

NOTES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

- Writing simple notes of encouragement can be incredibly uplifting to foster parents who might be struggling. This small gesture can help remind the families how loved and appreciated they truly are.

MEAL MINISTRY

PREPARATION

Ensure that meals are prepared to be packaged in freezer-safe, disposable bakeware dishes, sealed in plastic wrap, then covered with aluminum foil, to guard against freezer burn

LABELING

Ensure that all meals include a label that clearly lists:

1. ALL ingredients (to accommodate dietary restrictions)
2. Heating/baking instructions
3. The date the meal was prepared

MEAL IDEAS

- Spaghetti and Meatballs
- Macaroni and Cheese
- Chili
- Chicken Tenders
- Lasagna
- Tacos / Quesadillas

DESSERT IDEAS

- Cookies
- Cupcakes
- Ice Cream
- Brownies
- Pies
- Cakes

RESOURCE CLOSET

To ensure you are providing quality items to the foster families, consider only collecting items that are brand new. To accommodate all placements, be mindful of collecting items that are conducive to all ages, genders, and ethnicities.

HYGIENE PRODUCTS

- Washcloths
- Toothbrushes
- Toothpaste
- Body Wash
- Bath Towels
- Shampoo/Conditioner
- Multicultural Skin/Hair Care
- Hair Brushes
- Lotion

CLOTHING

- Everyday Outfits
- Pajamas
- Socks/Underwear
- Winter Coats
- Hats /Gloves

INFANT ITEMS

- Diapers
- Strollers
- Pacifiers
- Onesies
- Wipes
- Bottle/Sippy Cups
- Bibs
- Diaper Cream
- Formula

COMFORT ITEMS

- Stuffed Animals
- Toys
- Blankets
- Books

CHILDCARE

Offering childcare can provide foster parents with an opportunity to run errands, grab a meal, or simply take a nap for a few hours without the responsibility of caring for their children. It is a huge blessing to foster families, but there are a few essential procedures to follow to ensure the children are properly cared for.

VOLUNTEER APPLICATION ESSENTIALS

- General Information
- Childcare Experience
- Foster Care History
- Reason for Interest in Volunteering
- Background Check

TRAINING

- Trauma-Informed Care
- Behavior Management
- De-escalation Principles
- First Aid/Emergency Procedures

POLICIES

- Never be alone with a child
- Never enter the bathroom with a child
- Keep doors open at all times
- Maintain a calm composure at all times
- No pictures or videos of the children

NOTES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Writing encouraging notes is a simple way to support foster parents. Unfortunately, the language surrounding foster care is often overwhelmingly negative. When writing notes of encouragement, be sure to focus on the experience of the foster parent rather than the assumed emotions of the child.

PHRASES TO INCLUDE:

- "Thank you for opening your home to this child"
- "We're thinking of you"
- "We are here to support you"
- "Thank you for showing up"
- "You are doing important work"

PHRASES TO AVOID:

- "This child is so lucky to be in your home"
- "You are such a saint for helping these kids"
- "These kids just need your love"
- "I could never do what you do"
- "Your home is just what those kids need"

SECTION V: RESOURCES

*"Faith-based support
may be an important
way to help meet the
unmet needs of adoptive
and foster care families"*

JENNIFER M. HOOK ET AL.

TERMINOLOGY

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Traumatic events that occur before the age of 18 and often affect the way children view and interact with others

ATTACHMENT

The process of creating a secure bond with a caregiver

BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD

The commitment to finding the most ideal circumstance for the overall wellbeing of the child

BIRTH PARENTS

The biological parents of the child

CAREGIVER

The individual in charge of caring for the child

CASA

A volunteer "Court Appointed Special Advocate" that advocates on behalf of the child

CASE WORKER

The agency employee that oversees the child's foster care case

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

The agency that ensures the wellbeing of children by addressing reports of abuse and neglect

TERMINOLOGY

EMERGENCY PLACEMENT

The immediate placement of a child that needs a place to stay - often initially deemed short-term

LEGALLY FREE

Once parental rights have been terminated, the child becomes "legally free," meaning they can now be adopted

REMOVAL

The process of a child being removed from a home

RESPITE CARE

Short-term childcare designed to provide guardians with temporary assistance to hopefully strengthen the family unit

REUNIFICATION

The process of a child transitioning back to their birth/biological home

TERMINATION OF PARENTAL RIGHTS

The legal decision that the biological parents are no longer allowed to care for the child

VISITATION

Specific time allotted for kids in foster care to meet with their birth family

WAITING CHILDREN

Children in system who are unable to return to their birth homes and are waiting for permanent placement

ACRONYMS

AS/AD	Adopted Son / Adopted Daughter
CASA	Court Appointed Special Advocate
CPS	Child Protective Services
CW	Case Worker
DFPS	Department of Family and Protective Services
FC	Foster Care
FS/FD	Foster Son / Foster Daughter
SW	Social Worker
TBRI	Trust Based Relational Intervention
TIC	Trauma-Informed Care
TPR	Termination of Parental Rights

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Why should I add additional responsibility to my already strained pool of volunteers?

- Building a volunteer team is often a challenge for church leaders so adding extra responsibility may seem counterintuitive; however, explaining the importance of making student ministries accessible to all children may help draw the right volunteers to your team.



What if a child in foster care begins negatively impacting other kids (physical harm, inappropriate conversations, cursing)?

- As a church leader, your top priority is to create a ministry environment that is healthy and safe for ALL children, so this behavior should not be tolerated. There is a clear difference between making accommodations for children to thrive in a ministry context and allowing children to negatively impact others.



What if my leadership team does not want to implement these principles?

- Ultimately, you must submit to the decision of your leadership team, but ensure you are well-prepared when presenting your vision for foster care support in your church. Include specific actionable steps with a clear plan for implementation.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



My church doesn't have the finances to add any additional accommodations

- This is certainly a valid concern as budgets in church ministries are typically tight; however, many of the principles discussed in this handbook can be completed with little to no money. Try starting out with the inexpensive methods first and once noticeable improvements are made, the need for additional funds may become apparent.



My congregation doesn't have any families that foster. What should I do?

- This is actually the starting place for a lot of churches. If you do not currently have any foster families in your congregation, your church can begin by focusing on understanding the foster care system and building relationships in the community. By partnering with those already involved in the work, your church can gain firsthand experience and build a positive rapport with the foster care community.

CLOSING REMARKS

Your church has an opportunity to provide a safe place for children of all backgrounds to encounter Jesus.

By gaining an understanding of the foster care system, implementing Trauma-Informed principles, and actively partnering with foster families, you can help make the gospel accessible.

Equip your church to make a lasting and meaningful impact in your community.

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