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# Evangelicals

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WORK IT AND TAKE  
CARE OF IT.**

**— GEN. 2:15 (NIV)**

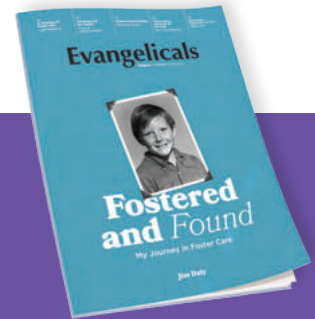
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# Evangelicals

The Magazine of the National Association of Evangelicals



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In a 2021 article in *The Atlantic*, journalist Olga Khazan asked a piercing question, “Is adoption meant to provide babies for families, or families for babies?”

Like many “either-or” questions, there can sometimes be a “both” response. But the question itself gets to the deeper framing of how society thinks about babies, adoption and foster care. The question is even more striking for Christians whose Savior — whom we are also to emulate — “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for many” (Matthew 20:28) and whose God “sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6).

It is encouraging to see that practicing Christians are more than twice as likely as the general population to adopt and significantly more likely to consider adoption or fostering. While only 2 percent of all Americans have adopted, this rises to 5 percent among practicing Christians, according to Barna Research. A recent Lifeway Research study found that more than two in five U.S. Protestant churchgoers (44 percent) say their congregation and its leaders are proactively involved with adoption and foster care.

While Christians sometimes have a reputation for things they are against, adoption and foster care are a cause that we

are known for. Still, we should examine our own orientation towards foster care and adoption. Why do we do it? And how are we equipped in it? The answers may seem obvious to some, but this magazine issue goes deeper to consider current realities and needs; theological underpinnings, particularly related to foster care; and the role that church communities can play to support foster and adoptive families.

Evangelicals believe that God designed humans to live in families that are lovingly devoted to — and able to care for — one another. The reality doesn’t always match up, leaving children without the care they need. This was the case at the time of the early church, and they rose to the occasion. May we, like them, become increasingly known for how we thoughtfully and lovingly we care for those who need families. **E**



## How Technology Impacts Relationships

“ The pandemic drove a large increase in the number of churches offering livestreams of their worship services, but some of these viewers were only temporary .... A consistent quarter of churchgoers see any reason as a valid reason to attend church via video streaming, but with additional experience with the approach, fewer are open to its use instead of in-person attendance.”

**Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, on the Lifeway's Protestant Churchgoer Views on Livestreaming report**

“ Empathy is cultivated out of a part of our brain that we actually don't let breathe and live out its capacity very often, because it's the part of our brain that 'turns on when we are bored' — when we're not doing anything, when we're not filling our minds with stimulation or information or getting something done. It's that part of the brain that is dedicated to creating self-narrative for reflection.

It's because our brains, when we are showering or when we're driving, are shifting into a different modality, and it's actually neurologically bound up in our capacity to empathize. When we are constantly on our phone, when we are constantly being stimulated by Netflix or reading the news, that part of our brain is not activating and so we aren't actually engaging in the empathy work. It's not even getting a chance to blossom and grow.”

**Felicia Wu Song on Today's Conversation podcast at [NAE.org/wusongpodcast](https://www.nae.org/wusongpodcast)**

“ A recent Pew Research Center survey shows that 17 percent of U.S. adults have unfollowed, unfriended, blocked or changed their settings to see less of someone on social media because of religious content the person posted or shared .... Democrats and independents who lean toward the Democratic Party are more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to say they have blocked, unfriended or unfollowed someone due to religious content they posted (22 percent vs. 12 percent).”

**Jeff Diamant, senior writer at Pew Research Center, on a June 2023 study of religion and social media**



## The Death of an Evangelical Pioneer

“ [Tim Keller] offered a radically different way. He pointed people to Jesus, and through Jesus' example to a life of self-sacrificial service .... Tim was confident, cheerful and at peace as he spiraled down toward death and up toward his maker. His passing has made us all very sad, but if you go back and listen to his sermons, which you should, you come back to gratitude for his life and to the old questions: Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?”

**David Brooks in The New York Times column, “Tim Keller Taught Me About Joy”**



“ Tim’s relationship with me was yet another example of his investment in people across difference. He was in a denomination that doesn’t ordain women, and he believed the Bible calls for distinct roles for men and women within the church and the household. I am a woman who is an ordained priest. We discussed our disagreements openly, but the conversations were never hostile. We found far more unity in our mutual faith in Christ and commitment to the Bible than our differences could undo.”

**Tish Harrison Warren in The New York Times column, “Tim Keller Showed Me What a Christian Leader Should Be”**

## Forever Homes

“ Each child placement into a forever home is unique and often complicated. The goal should always be made with the best interest of providing a loving and stable home to nourish the whole child, including their ethnic and cultural identity. I know how cherished children are by every tribe and that we can and should trust those indigenous nations to make these placements with the best interest of each child at the heart.”

**Carol Bremer-Bennett, head of World Renew, the relief arm of the Christian Reformed Church, in a Christianity Today article about the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold Indian Child Welfare Act**



If you’re looking to politics for fulfillment, you’ll always be disappointed, foolishly uncompromising and enraged. It’ll never be enough even when your side wins. Use politics as a tool to pursue justice and moral order. It’s not the place to find identity or fulfillment.  
**Justin Giboney @JustinEGiboney**

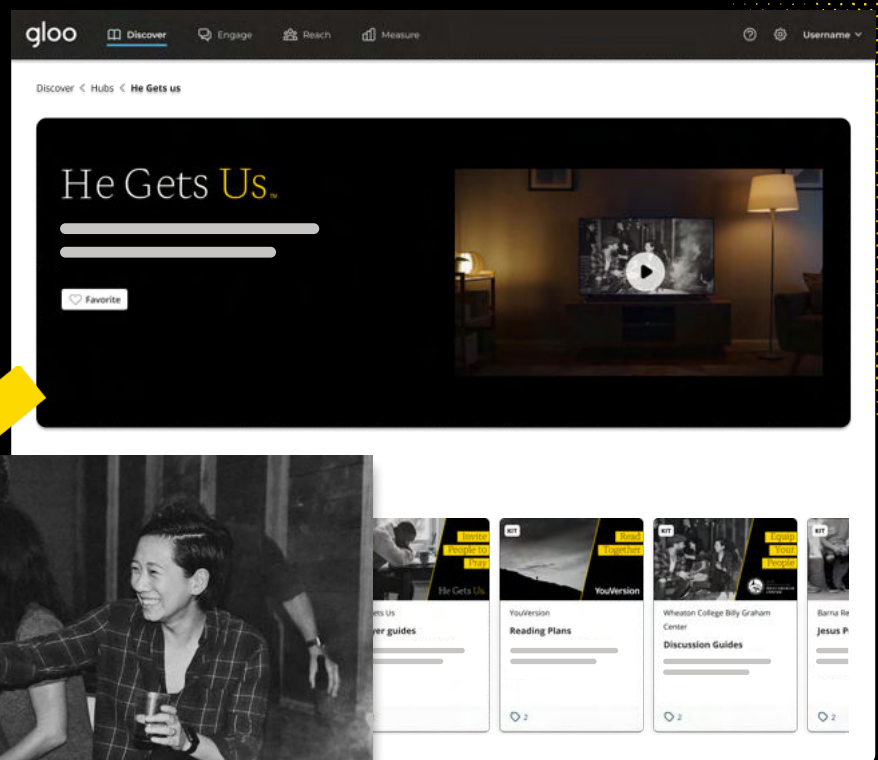


Don’t stop praying. God hears and he will respond.  
**Lisa Fields @LisaVFields**



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# EVANGELICAL CALENDAR

Please join the evangelical community at these events hosted by the NAE and its members. **Your prayers are welcome too.**

Many of these events include downloadable resources for promotion and participation.

OCTOBER 23-25, 2023

## Power and the Pulpit

Chicago, IL

Center for Pastor Theologians  
[CPTconference.com](http://CPTconference.com)

This year's Center for Pastor Theologians conference will help preachers and non-preachers alike to recover a theology of preaching — moving beyond homiletical technique, challenging confidence in human capacities and calling into question methods that have subtly shaped today's sermons and elevated human power.



OCTOBER 24-26, 2023

## Digital Media Con

Virtual

Evangelical Press Association & National Association of Evangelicals  
[DigitalMediaCon.com](http://DigitalMediaCon.com)

The Digital Media Con is a three-day online conference focusing exclusively on digital media and marketing for Christian communicators.



NOVEMBER 1-3, 2023

## Grow

Dallas, TX

RightNow Media  
[RightNowConferences.org](http://RightNowConferences.org)

The RightNow Conference is for pastors and church leaders who want to make healthy disciples. Together, they will explore and remember what disciples look like, how disciples act and think, and what disciples create as they reflect on Jesus.

NOVEMBER 8-9, 2023

## The Mobilized Church

Dallas, TX

Sixteen:Fifteen  
[1615.org/events](http://1615.org/events)

The Mobilized Church workshop will explore seven keys to help church and missions leaders cultivate a vibrant missions culture.

NOVEMBER 11-13, 2023

## BIPOC Spiritual Retreat

Asheville, NC

National Association of Evangelicals  
[NAE.org](http://NAE.org)

The BIPOC Spiritual Retreat will bring together leaders of color who are engaged in racial justice and reconciliation work in Christian ministry for a time of rest and reflection — to connect with one another, to learn from one of the leading voices in this space, and to find spiritual and emotional care.

NOVEMBER 12, 2023

## Orphan Sunday

Christian Alliance for Orphans  
[CAFO.org/orphansunday2023](http://CAFO.org/orphansunday2023)

Since 2004, churches across the world have celebrated Orphan Sunday on the second Sunday in November. This is an opportunity for church communities to reflect on God's heart for the orphaned and vulnerable together.

NOVEMBER 29-30, 2023

## Denominational Executives Retreat

Dallas, TX

National Association of Evangelicals  
[NAE.org](http://NAE.org)

Each year NAE denominational executives across evangelical traditions come together to learn from and encourage one another in their unique places of leadership.

JANUARY 22-26, 2024

## Christian Student Leadership Conference

Washington, DC

National Association of Evangelicals  
[NAE.org/csdc](http://NAE.org/csdc)

The Christian Student Leadership Conference is a place where college students who care deeply about today's pressing issues come to learn how to faithfully and effectively offer a Christian witness in public policy.



## WORTH NOTING

### ✓ “For the Health of the Nation” Video Curriculum

For more than a decade, evangelical Christians across the political spectrum have used “For the Health of the Nation” to apply biblical principles to complex issues. Now, in partnership with RightNow Media, we have an 8-session video series that brings the content to life through dynamic biblical teaching.

Each teaching session (about 10-15 minutes) is complemented by a discussion guide that will enable small groups to have rich conversations as they go deeper into God’s Word. Christians will not always agree on the specifics of governance or the best roads to social transformation, but as part of holistic discipleship, we need to know how to apply biblical principles to the issues of our day.

NAE President Walter Kim hosts the series with teaching from Nicole Martin, Ed Stetzer, Gabriel and Jeanette Salguero, and Eugene Cho. The session topics include preserving human rights; protecting religious freedom and liberty of conscience; pursuing racial justice and reconciliation; seeking justice and

compassion for the poor; promoting just peace and restraining violence; safeguarding the nature and sanctity of human life; strengthening marriages, families and children; and caring for God’s creation.



The series is available for FREE through an NAE portal on the RightNow Media platform. Make plans to incorporate this series in your church small groups, college classes and adult education opportunities.

### ✓ Investing in Women in Leadership

Along with the Fuller Center for Spiritual Formation, the National Association of Evangelicals hosted a one-year spiritual formation journey for a cohort of 26 national female leaders representing different races, ages, denominations and professional roles. Participants included representatives of NAE member institutions and other leaders from around the country.

The program was a hands-on, relational way to deepen spiritual practices. Women shared that they felt more connected to the Lord and to each other, lifted and reassured that God is in control. One participant said, “I feel at peace, knowing that I am known, I’m loved, and God’s got this.”

These women experienced enhanced leadership capacity, stronger connections with colleagues across the evangelical spectrum, and a deeper walk

with Christ. This is just one example of how the NAE organizes opportunities that transcend denominational lines and brings people from different backgrounds together to encourage one another and build up the Body of Christ.

Watch how Fuller Formation Groups situate spiritual formation in the context of community and God.



## ✓ Supreme Court Affirms Free Speech

The Supreme Court's decision in *303 Creative v. Elenis* ruled that Lorie Smith cannot be required by law to compromise her Christian witness or "contradict God's true story of marriage" by designing websites for same-sex weddings.

The National Association of Evangelicals filed a court amicus brief in the case, arguing that a state "is not free to interfere with speech for no better reason than promoting an approved message or discouraging a disfavored one, however enlightened either purpose may strike the government." The brief also points out that Smith is happy to serve clients who are in same-sex marriages. Her concern is not with the personal status of her customers but with the message that she is asked to express.

NAE President Walter Kim said, "In a democratic and pluralistic society, there must be room for those with dissenting views to peacefully express them and follow their conscience without fear of prosecution. We are encouraged that the Supreme Court has upheld the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech for all Americans. With very limited exceptions, governments should not tell citizens what they can or cannot say."

## ✓ Workplace Religious Freedom Strengthened

In its unanimous decision in *Groff v. DeJoy*, the Supreme Court strengthened important worker protection against religious discrimination. The Supreme Court ruled that employers may not dismiss employee requests for religious accommodation simply by pointing to a minimal cost to the business.

"Secular employers are legally obligated to accommodate employees' religious observance and practice, except in rare cases in which doing so would create an undue hardship for the business. We should not force workers of any religion to violate their faith in order to keep their jobs," said Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

*Groff v. DeJoy* involved a former postal worker who wanted to honor God by worship and not working on the Sabbath. Groff argued that his desire to observe Sabbath did not pose an "undue hardship" on the U.S. Postal Service and highlighted his willingness to cover extra shifts on other days, as well as the willingness of coworkers to cover Sunday shifts.

## ✓ Families at the Border

For many immigrant families the decision to seek protection and opportunity in the United States is excruciatingly difficult. Some are escaping extortion by corrupt officials; forced recruitment into criminal gangs; sexual abuse and violence; or the debilitating weight of extreme poverty.

But there are few ways to gain timely legal entry to the United States, other than the slim possibility of winning an asylum case after a perilous journey that often includes paying exorbitant fees to smuggling cartels and risking abuse at each step of the journey.

Although the rhetoric may differ, the Biden administration has continued border policies designed to deter migration. Some of these measures have been blocked in court. Encouraging developments include new processing centers in U.S. embassies, smart

phone apps for scheduling appointments, and allowing private sponsorship of some families. Other reforms will require congressional action.



To contact your representatives about immigration reform, visit [NAE.org/takeaction](https://www.nae.org/takeaction).



Cullen Rodgers-Gates is director of development and membership at the National Association of Evangelicals.

# The Gospel-Centered Ministry of Adoption and Foster Care

## How Nightlight Christian Adoptions Challenges the Church to Embrace Its Calling

For Daniel Nehrbass and his team at Nightlight Christian Adoptions, adoption and foster care are unequivocally gospel imperatives. “Not every agency is motivated by the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. We see adoption and foster care as answers to both,” he said.

During the 1950s, approximately 8 percent of all pregnancies resulted in adoption. A group of churches in Whittier, California, who were members of the National Association of Evangelicals, recognized the need for more Christian adoptive families. As a result, in 1959 these churches came together to create Nightlight Christian Adoptions in a concerted effort to identify and match Christian families to children needing adoption. Since that time, Nightlight has expanded their services to include international adoptions, foster care placements and embryo adoptions. Nehrbass has served as Nightlight’s president for the past 11 years.

Nehrbass notes that there has been a decline in domestic adoptions over the past several decades. However, contrary to what one might assume, abortion is not the only reason why domestic adoption has declined. One of the greatest culprits is the stigma against birth moms placing their babies for adoption.

According to a new study by the National Council

for Adoption, the percentage of birth mothers who have experienced some degree of stigma by the time they placed their babies for adoption has risen from 70 percent to more than 90 percent over the past 50 years. Nehrbass suggests that partly as a result of this stigma, the decline in domestic adoptions has been matched by an increase in the number of foster care placements as many of these children are born into at-risk family situations who are unable to adequately provide for them.



## The Language Scripture Uses

Having served as a pastor for 17 years prior to joining Nightlight, Nehrbass is passionate about educating pastors and their congregations to better understand and embrace adoption and foster care as gospel-centered ministry. He says that one of the most significant obstacles to securing time to share about Nightlight's work in churches is the perception that adoption is a for-profit business that caters mainly to rich couples.

Nehrbass' response is to emphasize that adoption is paradigmatic in Scripture for salvation. "Adoption isn't just an analogy for the gospel; it is the language Scripture uses to describe how we are made part of God's family," he said.

When it comes to adoption, the Church needs to eliminate the stigma for birth mothers who do not have the support needed to raise a child. "We need to do a better job of telling the stories of women who've placed their children for adoption in order to normalize it," Nehrbass says.

To that end, Nightlight has utilized the video series "I Am That Kid," a resource designed to normalize adoption for birth parents and help them expand their imagination for what is possible. Nightlight is also developing its own curriculum to amplify these stories as a resource for pastors and congregations.

## Foster Care As a Calling

In addition to the anti-adoption stigma toward birth mothers and misconceptions within churches, Nightlight also faces challenges in convincing Christians to see foster care as a calling. Nehrbass describes a typical scenario in which a pastor preaches about foster care on Sunday, and Monday morning Nightlight receives several phone calls from members of that congregation expressing their desire to adopt healthy infants. There is a disconnect between the need for Christian foster families and what families are willing to do.

Nehrbass readily acknowledges that fostering is hard. When they were in their 20s, Nehrbass and his wife fostered two children whom they eventually adopted, but it was very challenging. Families already have a certain level of stress with which they are functioning. The integration of a foster child often increases that stress, because he/she introduces a new dynamic into the family system. Nehrbass longs to see the Church better resourced to not only advocate effectively for foster care, but to support its members in their foster care journeys.



## "A Neglected Ministry"

Finally, Nehrbass believes there needs to be more conversations in the Church around embryo adoption. "I don't think most pastors are aware that they have members of their church who are living with guilt over the embryos they have in storage for which they have no plan. This is a neglected ministry, as many pastors are unequipped to help their congregants navigate the complicated emotions involved. Members of your church know that they have human beings frozen with a fate that is uncertain, but for which they are responsible. The Church can alleviate the guilt and provide solutions by normalizing adoption of embryos, in addition to the adoption and foster care of post-birth children," he said.

Nightlight's unique embryo adoption service is known as their Snowflakes program, which launched in 1997 as the world's first embryo adoption program. Before Snowflakes, embryo donation was anonymous, so no home study was needed, there was no matching with families and no openness in the process.

Nehrbass notes, "We knew that in order for more people to offer their embryos for donation, families needed greater confidence to place their embryos for adoption."

Nightlight implements a holistic approach through Snowflakes, which consists of three core components: a home study; matching by a doctor; and an open process in which families meet each other. In this program, Nightlight implements social work best practices. By doing so, many couples choose to place their embryos with Nightlight. Whereas a typical clinic may have five sets of embryos, Nightlight is always working with several hundred families.

Nehrbass shares that Nightlight's long-standing membership in the NAE has helped to legitimize adoption and foster care as Christian ministry and an act of obedience to God. Another way in which NAE membership has been valuable is by signaling Nightlight's solidly evangelical identity as they network with other groups. The NAE is grateful for the faithfulness of organizations like Nightlight who persevere in their mission to bring the good news of Jesus to every aspect of human existence. **E**

# Fostered and *Found*



My Journey in Foster Care

**Jim Daly**



Every child's journey into the foster care system looks a bit different, and mine is no exception.

Growing up in Southern California, my stepdad abandoned me and my siblings within hours of my mother's funeral. I was nine years old. Standing beside my mom's grave sporting my best corduroy pants, white shirt, and blue clip-on tie, my stoic demeanor belied my devastation. My biological father would die of alcoholism a few years later.

My childhood is full of some tough memories. Memories of a broken home, broken promises and dreams that just didn't come true. But landing at the Reil residence on T-Circle Drive in Morongo Valley, California, I was somewhat optimistic that my new foster home would be normal.

As it would turn out, I had gone from bad to worse, especially when my foster dad accused me of trying to kill him by pushing him off a cliff. Keep in mind we lived at the bottom of a valley, and I was just now 10 years old.

To say that living with the Reil family was "strange" would be kind. Each night the family gathered around the table to roll cigarettes and smoke together. An AM radio would crackle in the distance. We'd chase chickens and then butcher them with the swing of an axe. One of the family's boys married an older cousin — and another teenage boy in the family regularly tried to flirt with me.

Thankfully, not all the 390,000+ children in the American foster care system face such dangerous dysfunction. But it's my harrowing and heartbreaking experience as a child in foster care that inspired me to spearhead Focus on the Family's Wait No More program, our adoption and foster care effort. No child should have to endure what I encountered.

### **The Christian Life**

Being intimately involved in people's lives for Christ can be messy. We often assume that the Christian life is supposed to be easy and simple. Yet, the Bible is filled with one story after another about difficulty and the need for faith. With our faith in God and his sovereignty to undergird our approach, Christians are uniquely positioned to make a significant difference in these children's lives.



Throughout Scripture, we see that God has a special place in his heart for orphans. Indeed he says that he is their father (Psalm 68:5), and he defends and sustains them (Psalm 10:17–18). He also commands us to “take up the cause of the fatherless” (Isaiah 1:17). Poignantly James, brother to Jesus, says that “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” (James 1:27).

I have pondered too if being “polluted by the world” includes — but is not limited to — prioritizing worldly conveniences over the hard work to “act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6:8).

No, this is not easy work. But these children whom God loves are in desperate need — not simply through lack of means, but relational connectedness. It is no surprise when I read that up to 80 percent of children in foster care have significant mental health issues, compared with 18-22 percent of the general population.

Yet research shows that kids in foster care who get even just brief exposure to a functional family have a markedly improved chance for success when they get married. Children who have known nothing but brokenness, but who live with a healthy family for even four to six months can experience what healthy family relationships should look like. When they can feel wholeness, sense it, be a part of it, it helps set them up for success in life in the best of ways.

### **Play a Part**

My wife, Jean, and I have been foster parents, and we do respite care. Respite simply means you come around other foster families and give them a break by taking the kids for a weekend or supporting them in their



efforts. Whether it be providing meals, doing laundry, or coming alongside a family prayerfully and emotionally, there are ways to play a part.

Adoption and foster care represent a deeply meaningful journey, yet adoptive and foster families face unique stressors, including insecure attachment issues, trauma responses, and service agencies who don't provide sufficient training or support. We're not all called to do the same thing, but we're all capable of doing something. The ultimate goal is for every believer to feel empowered with a sense of calling and direction about their role.

There are approximately 350,000 churches in the United States and about 100,000 children who are looking for adoptive homes. That's one child for every three churches.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7).

The Apostle Paul is telling us that we all have different functions but the same purpose. Not everyone will open their home to a child, but there are still significant roles for other parts of the Body of Christ. There are approximately 350,000 churches in the United States and about 100,000 children who are looking for adoptive homes. That's one child for every three churches.

At Focus on the Family, we wholeheartedly agree that churches and individual Christians have a special

role to play in caring for children who are in desperate need. We hope that many Christians will welcome children into their homes and adopt them into their families. At the same time, we understand that not everyone can, or is called to, adopt. There are many ways to help care for orphans.

That's why Focus on the Family also encourages Christians to **W**.R.A.P. around adoptive (or foster) families. As part of the community that surrounds these special families, you can **W**restle in prayer, provide **R**espice care, perform **A**cts of service and claim the **P**romises of God for that family.

Life at the Reils' was very unreal for me, and I wanted to leave almost from the moment I was driven up the family's gravel driveway. It's not for me to judge the motives of the family, though it seems clear to me they were not well-suited for the role. I need to acknowledge, even in that mess at the Reils', I was grateful to have somewhere to sleep and food to eat. They did help in the most basic of ways.

Nevertheless, God redeemed that experience. Foster care is imperfect because people are imperfect. But decades later that difficult season contributed to Focus on the Family launching our program, which has inspired and compelled thousands of families to welcome children into their homes from the foster care system. **E**



# Theology of Foster Care

Protection and care for vulnerable children has been a defining mark of Christianity since its first days. Even as a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire, Christians were known for rescuing and raising children abandoned by their pagan neighbors. Early church documents required that candidates for leadership be known as “lovers of orphans.”

This practice flowed from clear biblical commands. The call to look after “the orphan” and “the fatherless” included any child who lacked the full protection, provision and care that God intends families to provide — whether due to the death of one or both parents, abandonment, incapacity or otherwise.

For Christians today, this ancient commitment often takes the form of foster care. Foster care is meant to be temporary — providing a supportive home with hopes that in time children will be able to return safely to their biological family.

But foster care and all that surrounds it is no light endeavor. The foster system itself can be deeply frustrating for all involved. Meanwhile, caring for children who’ve known much hurt can require an immense outlay of body, mind and emotions.

Such an undertaking calls for a robust theology. The costliness and complexity will quickly crush wishful thinking like a bicycle struck by a car. Little wonder why more than half of new foster parents quit within the first year. To persevere with joy, we need strength and wisdom far beyond our own. Happily, Scripture offers both.

## Essential Roles for Both the Government and the Church

“Government makes a terrible parent,” a friend of mine

observed. For 30 years, she’d helped lead public systems capable of protecting children from harm and providing certain material goods and one-size-fits-all services. But what about the deeper stuff — the personal care and belonging — that children need most? She increasingly recognized that had to come from somewhere else.

Scripture points in the same direction. The Bible affirms a vital role for government. As Romans 13 describes, God has established governing authorities to uphold justice, maintain order and protect the weak. That certainly includes children who lack basic safety and care.

But while public systems can do much to protect children from abuse and severe neglect, government alone can rarely enable children to thrive. As study after study reveals, the outcomes are dismal for children who grow up in government systems.

That’s because the deepest needs of human beings cannot be met by assembly line. Children require the kind of personal attention and caring relationships that can only come from a loving home. That’s why God’s people can’t outsource this calling. Both government and church have a vital role to play.

## Not Just a Requirement, but a Revealing of God’s Character

Christian care for vulnerable children is rooted in biblical mandate. “Defend the cause of the fatherless,” commands



the book of Isaiah. “Pure religion,” says James, is marked by showing up on behalf of “orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27).

But this call is not merely a requirement of God’s people. More profoundly it is a revealing of God’s nature. The same words that Isaiah used appeared hundreds of years before in the Torah as a description of God himself: “He defends the cause of the fatherless...” (Deuteronomy 10:17). To care for the most vulnerable is ultimately a reflection of God’s character. As Psalm 68:5–6 puts it, “A Father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. He sets the lonely in families.”

For the Christian, the wellspring runs even deeper. This is not only the story of a child without protection or care. It is our story, too. For what is the gospel if not that God welcomed us into his family when we were most in need? When Christians welcome and serve vulnerable children — whether through foster care or adoption, mentoring or support of struggling families — we are simply giving a small, humble reflection of the way he first loved us.

For what is the gospel if not that God welcomed us into his family when we were most in need?

### Three Mooring Truths for Foster Care

This love-in-response-to-gospel is the fountainhead of all Christian service. It is the only motivation that can outlast the world’s relentless need. But amidst the great complexity and costliness of foster care, three further theological truths are vital:

**A Theology of Restoration.** Not every child in foster care will return to their biological family. But that’s the hope. The trouble is, it’s sometimes hard to desire that, especially when the child you’ve come to love has been harmed by the family. I Corinthians gently rebukes: “Love hopes all things.” No matter how far a person has fallen, the gospel insists they

are never beyond the reach of God’s redemptive love. This grounds Christians in a hope deeper than wishful thinking and calls us to work for the restoration of struggling parents whenever possible.

**A Theology of Koinonia.** The challenges of foster care are more than anyone can bear alone. Thankfully, God gave us the local church. The true fellowship — *koinonia* — that God intends for his people is far more than Sunday services. It bears burdens (Galatians 6:2), shares hospitality and resources (Romans 12:13), and rejoices and mourns together (Romans 12:15). Not everyone is called to foster or adopt or work with struggling parents, but each of us can play a vital part.

**A Theology of Suffering.** Children and families involved in the foster care system have tasted the world at its most broken. When we welcome them into our homes and our hearts, we share in that hurt with them. This makes no sense if life’s purpose is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. As Paul described, “I want to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). It’s not that we want to suffer. But we trust that amidst the trials we can experience an unparalleled fellowship with Christ. In God, even the very hardest things can be the source of great good — both in our own lives (Romans 5:3–5) and for others (i.e., Genesis 50:20).

Grounded in these truths, we have a foundation sturdy enough to weather the strains we’ll face if we answer the age-old call to care for vulnerable children and families today. Along with great challenges, we’ll experience joys we’d have tasted no other way. As a great many foster parents have expressed to me — and I’ve experienced firsthand as well — we’ll someday look back and say, “One of the hardest things I’ve ever done. One of the very best things, too.” **E**

For more on how to support foster and adoptive families in your church, see the practical guide, *Everyone Can Do Something*, at [JasonJohnsonBlog.com/everyonecandosomething](http://JasonJohnsonBlog.com/everyonecandosomething).



**Andy Goodwin** is principal and CEO of Covenant Christian High School in Indianapolis, and **Jamie Goodwin** is assistant professor of humanitarian and disaster leadership at Wheaton College.

# Wholeness at the Center

## Why Foster Care Is Worth “Getting Too Attached”

Knowing that we ought to do something and actually wanting to do it are usually at odds, until we embrace wholeness as our goal.

When we first consider foster care, it appears to be a unidirectional pursuit with foster parents swooping in to rescue foster children from their placelessness. But the journey to wholeness cannot be summarized as the matching of the resourced to the resourceless, the together to the scattered, or the whole to the broken.

Wholeness is, instead, about each person laying down his or her old life in order to live what is true, good and beautiful. As in many paths of discipleship, it is a call to die to our former selves in the hope of being raised to new life together with God and with one another.

Christ reminds and resources us for this obedience.

### Settling Into the Unsettling

Many people who know we are foster parents say things like, “We could never do what you do, but good on you for doing that!” Embedded in the encouragement is a statement of unwillingness to enter the fray.

They are recognizing how destabilizing it would be to

allow that sort of brokenness into their lives, and perhaps on the flipside how wrenching it would be to attach themselves to a child and let them be a part of their family knowing they might not stay. Foster care is certainly an exercise in settling into the unsettling.

We, too, liked our life prior to signing up to foster. We had one son who was born to us just a week prior to our 11<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We traveled whenever and wherever we wanted, whether across state lines or abroad, and we didn’t have to ask for anyone’s permission to do so. We had all the paperwork we needed.

Because we are bilingual, we raised our oldest son in both languages, and we didn’t have to stop to interpret for one another. We followed our community’s norms for behavior and discipline. Nobody felt nervous around us about dysregulated blowups, running away and the occasional cursing tirade. It was all simple and clear. It was the way we had dreamed it would be. And we, each in his and her own way, were resistant for it to be shattered.

### Equipped for the Task

We are not sure at what point our hearts warmed to wanting the “ought-to.” It’s tempting to point to moments of our foster son’s quick compliance and easy self-regulation. (We do really, really want those to be the norm.) It’s probably trite to talk



about realizing our own brokenness as the lynchpin.

As performance-oriented souls, we were pretty sure of our own shortcomings without signing up for this gig. More likely, the convergence has been a progression of allowing performance and behavior to reside well underneath personhood, just as our new son may now lay down his fight to survive rejection and loss.

Christ reminds and resources us for this obedience. We consider the extent he humbled himself and was obedient, and the ways in which he loved strangers like family without assurance of love in return. Scripture teaches we ought to commit to these children without promise of outcome, following his lead to “set the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6). Instead of a situational outcome, God promises that we will be blessed, be made new, and best of all that he will be with us always. Indeed, while a broken attachment to foster kids is a risk, the prospect of deeper attachment to God is the great promise for prospective foster parents and for all those who keep his commands. “I will not leave you as orphans, I will

come to you,” Jesus declares (John 14:18).

And so, in faith, we have prayerfully opened a new part of our lives to his will in pursuit of wholeness for each of us. It’s not always a want-to, but it is becoming a love-to. 📌

**Stories of transracial adoptees must be heard - even uncomfortable ones**  
*Nicole Chung*

As a Korean American adoptee, the strength of my connection to my white family is what makes me feel safe, reliable, approachable to some.

**Transracial Adoption**

Although no one can fully anticipate what being a foster care or adoptive parent is like, transracial adoption comes with unique challenges. A first step is hearing — and learning from — the stories of transracial adoptees. In an article published by The Guardian, Nicole Chung shares her experience. Read it here: [TinyURL.com/76ey8hba](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/17/transracial-adoption).

# LEARN HOW YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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**Stephanie Shivers** is an administrator for The Village House and provides trauma-informed care at Church of the City in Franklin, Tennessee.



# Wrap Around Families

Pure religion cares for orphans and widows in their distress, says James 1:27. This verse is the heartbeat of our church at Church of the City in Franklin, Tennessee. If you attend Church of the City for any length of time, you'll quickly come to realize that starting at the pulpit caring for vulnerable children is foundational.

**W**e believe that not everyone is called to foster or adopt, but as the Body of Christ, we are all called to help — provide care in the form of a meal, laundry services, babysitting, prayer or simply an encouraging word to foster and adoptive families. When these families feel loved and cared for, they can better care for the vulnerable children in their homes.

An estimated 391,000 children are currently displaced from their homes and in foster care. These children are unable to live with their biological parents due to abuse, neglect or other unstable living situations. For these reasons, children find themselves either living with family members, close friends or in a foster home. Children in foster care come from a hard place and have endured trauma, which often creates higher needs and requires more care and attention than a biological child.

Church of the City's Wrap Around ministry provides support to foster families within our church in multiple ways. The Jones family, for example, have three biological children and two foster children. Sally, another church member, recently attended Wrap Around training and has a desire

to provide two meals a month for the Jones family. Christy provides weekly laundry support by picking up their clothes every Wednesday morning and bringing it back, laundered and folded, in the evening. John and Betty provide relief care for the family two times a month by watching all five children for 2-3 hours so Mr. and Mrs. Jones can enjoy a much-needed date night. This unit makes up a Wrap Around team for the Jones family.

Another service of our Wrap Around ministry is called Wrap Around Closet, which provides free clothing, toys, car seats and other needed items for the care of a foster child to families all across Middle Tennessee (and even outside Tennessee). The Wrap Around Closet serves 30-40 families weekly and 60-100 kids per month.

Wrap Around ministry can look different in different contexts. This ministry plays a vital role in supporting vulnerable children, their families and their foster families, and it enables churches to participate in systemic change for a better community. This is how we bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). 📌





EXCERPT

# Where Grace Abounds All the More

I looked Craig straight in the eyes and said, “You’re not my dad.” Then he cried and refused to speak to me for hours. To be fair, if he had spoken to me, I would have refused to speak to him. I’m not sure why we were arguing. But I remember intentionally hiding away and not wanting to be found.

When he addressed the issue, he told me he’d never heard those words, even from Asher, though he was Craig’s stepson. From foster youth, these words are common. Looking back, I realize these words were probably difficult for him to hear because he desperately wanted to be a biological father, or any kind of father, really. He wanted to attach himself to me, because he wanted to be a father in every way, including me perceiving him as my dad.

But parents can’t go into foster care to fulfill what is

broken and lost in themselves, because in foster care the variable foster parents have the least amount of control over is the foster youth, whose trauma has likely left them feeling broken and lost.

Foster care is a place of such redemption for so many. Abandoned children, barren couples (and fruitful ones too, sometimes), and a broken system come together to reflect God’s adoption of his children and an Abba, Daddy-like, fatherly love we all seek from the time we are born.







**Tori Hope Petersen** is an author, speaker and cofounder of Beloved Initiative.

But we cannot go into foster care seeking full-fledged healing — as children, as parents, or advocates wanting to redeem our stories. The only factor that will truly and fully heal us from the inside out is believing that God is our Abba — our Daddy, who takes care of us, protects us, and loves us as we are.

I usually recommend to infertile couples that if they get involved in foster care because they want babies, they should prepare themselves for older children. Many times, infertile couples who wish to adopt through foster care say yes to placements who are older, hopeful it will work out. Though intentions are sweet, many of them are unprepared for teenage behaviors or reunification, though reunification with the biological family is a large part of the foster care system.

Foster care is solely to fulfill the needs of the most vulnerable families and children in our nation.

Children aren't products we get to choose for our own convenience. Rather, children are gifts to foster parents to refine their already God-given gifts. The purpose of foster care is not cheap adoption. The purpose of foster care is to make families whole, and while sometimes that happens through adoption, other times it happens through reunification. And many times, it's not with a newborn. If you're going into foster care to fill your own picture-perfect hopes and dreams, you're going into foster care for the wrong reasons. Foster care is solely to fulfill the needs of the most vulnerable families and children in our nation.

Now, many families do go into foster care and adoption to fulfill their own wants, but because God is so kind to us, he aligns our hearts with his. Foster care and adoption can be entered into for selfish reasons, but what a reason for grace to abound all the more. Truly, this is foster care. God restores families broken apart through reunification. God brings multiple families together to help raise children in foster care.


God makes families whole and offers his children a home through adoption.

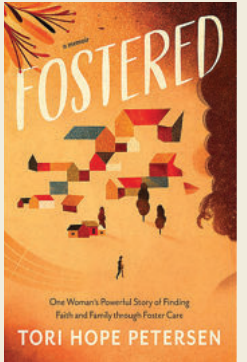
Reunification is not always the best option, nor is adoption always the best option. The foster care community knows, possibly more than anyone else, that two different feelings and ideas, like joy and sorrow, or gain and loss, can live in the same place. We know tension all too well, so we must not paint adoption or reunification as always good or bad. Restoring families is not black-and-white. It's a beautiful masterpiece of colors unnamed and newly discovered.

Many times I've held the knowledge of God's love in one hand and the idea that earthly means can heal me in my other hand. In my right hand I hold tight onto the truth that God loves, and in my left hand I hold just as tight onto the lie that I am not enough as I am. But here's the truth for all of those who feel that way.

We are all enough. You are enough when you face infertility. You are enough when that adoption falls through. You are enough when the beautiful life you've imagined looks uglier than you've ever seen. You are enough when you react to your triggers.

You are enough when you aren't adopted on earth. You are enough because you are adopted in heaven. You are enough because God is enough, and through his Spirit, he makes you enough. You are enough not because of anything you've done or anything you'll ever do. You're enough because God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross, to declare that his enough-ness can make it so that you are enough. **E**

 Tori Hope Petersen grew up in the foster care system, a biracial child in a confusing and volatile world. Growing up with a mentally ill mother and living in 12 different foster homes, nothing was in her favor. And yet, she found faith and family through foster care. This article has been excerpted and adapted from *Fostered* © 2022 by Tori Hope Petersen and is used with permission of B&H Publishing. Order at [Lifeway.com](http://Lifeway.com).





# Becoming a Laboratory of Love

In 1969, Fred Rogers of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” testified before a skeptical Senate Subcommittee on Communication to seek funding for his children’s program. In little more than six minutes, without a flashy multimedia presentation or much oratorical flourish, Mister Roger made his case for the dignity and desires of children.

**H**is presentation so compelled the audience that even self-professed “tough guy” Senator John Pastore declared himself roused with “goose bumps” by the testimony. It seemed that people’s imaginations wandered back to their own childhoods, with all their hopes and hurts. The moment dispelled cynicism about what adults could do and summoned empathy for what children most need.

Each child is unique, but our needs are universal. Mother Teresa once said that “the biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for and deserted by everybody.” The family is God’s laboratory of love, where we are intended to discover dignity, security and trust. Yet, for too many children, the lab has been shut down, or the experiments of life have somehow gone awry.

This must rouse God’s heart. The themes of adoption and care for children pulse throughout Scripture. God adopts Old Testament Israel as his “firstborn son” (Exodus 4:22);

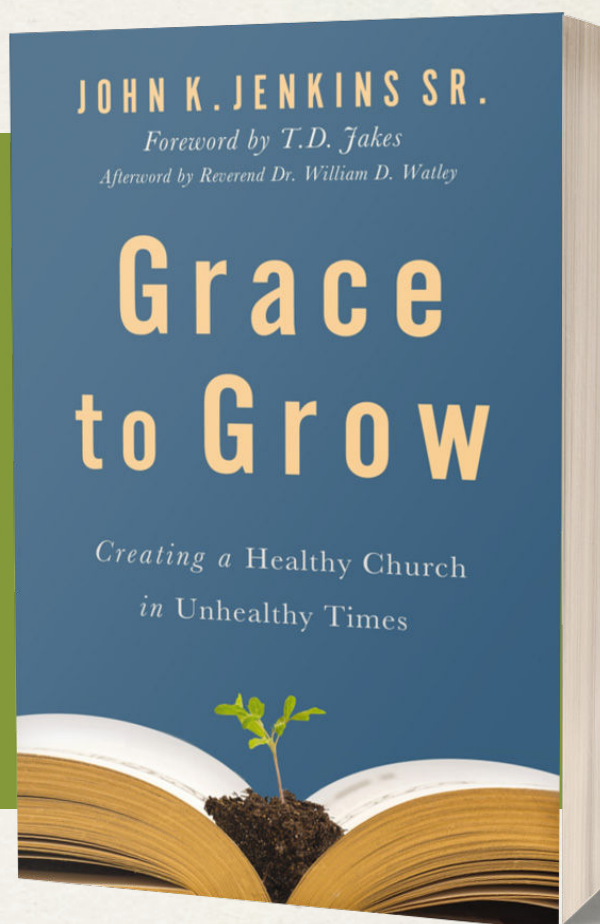
Jesus invites the children into his presence “for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Luke 18:16); the Holy Spirit grants us a spirit of adoption that enables our hearts to cry out “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15), whether in joy or in sorrow, and always in hope. God commits himself to “defend the cause of the fatherless” (Deuteronomy 10:18) and calls us to do the same (Exodus 22:22; Psalm 82:3; Isaiah 1:17; James 1:27).

God may be rousing your spirit. Maybe the Spirit crying out “Abba, Father” is taking on a new meaning. Pay attention, do some research, have some conversations, and pray. While fostering or adopting is not everyone’s call, the steady accumulation of kind deeds and the encircling support of the Church should enable us to live out more fully our call to be the family of God. **E**

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