

# **Churchâ€™s foster care focus enriches Chester family**

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Cheyenne, age 12, has found a foster home with Stephanie (left) and Terry Chester of Orchard Road Baptist Church in Lewisville, and everyone concerned is looking forward to the day when her adoption by the Chester family will be finalized.

Peggy Starkey (right), a Child Protective Services specialist with the CHILD (Congregations Helping in Love and Dedication) program, helped bring the new family together.

# Church's foster care focus enriches Chester family

**By George Henson**

*Staff Writer*

LEWISVILLE—It may be unusual for a church to focus its ministry on foster care, but 12-year-old Cheyanne certainly is glad one North Texas church has done just that.

Orchard Road Baptist Church in Lewisville has made foster care the cornerstone of its ministry, and Cheyanne is the first child taken in by a family there. And soon, when she calls Terry and Stephanie Chester “Mom” and “Dad,” it will be official. Permanent adoption papers are making their way through the system.

Orchard Road is one of about 100 Texas churches of many denominations taking part in Congregations Helping in Love and Dedication (CHILD). The goal of CHILD is to recruit and license as foster parents at least two families from each participating congregation.

**"We want to grow and become known as a church for people who want to go through the process but not have to go through it alone."**

**-Jerry Rogers, pastor  
of Orchard Road  
Baptist Church**

Congregations are also encouraged to develop support services for their foster families such as respite care, reduced tuition for day care, tutoring and after-school programs, transportation, celebrations for special occasions and enrichment activities.

Orchard Road hopes to become just such a place of support. The Chesters say they already have felt the congregation's support in the time Cheyanne has lived with them.

"The old saying that it takes a village to raise a child really is lived out here," Chester said.

"Here, all the children are all our children," Pastor Jerry Rogers said.

Now, the church is just waiting for the number of children in the church to increase—and not because of a baby boom. All but about three families in the congregation are going through the foster parent training.

Not all plan to adopt as the Chesters have, and some are training primarily to be available as respite foster parents. Regardless, the ministry is one the whole church supports, Rogers said.

While the church always has had a heart for children, he said, a particular incident about a year ago ratcheted that commitment to a higher level. Rogers arrived at church early one Sunday morning and found a teen-aged girl waiting for him outside the door. She said she was pregnant and needed to talk to the police. Investigators discovered she was only 16 years old and pregnant with her brother's child.

The church particularly was rocked by the event because there had been a prior contact. Her parents had dropped off the girl the year before for Vacation Bible School with some younger siblings. The girl was too old for any of the classes, so she was made a helper for one of the teachers.

“We had to step out when the authorities got involved, and we anguished over that,” Rogers said. “The next week, we contacted Peggy, and it’s snowballed since then.”

The “Peggy” he contacted is Peggy Starkey, a Child Protective Services specialist who relates to faith-based organizations.

After Starkey explained the CHILD program, the Chesters knew God had sped up their timetable for becoming parents, they said.

“Stephanie and I had talked about doing this while we were dating, and we had thought it might be time in a few more years,” Chester said.

“But I think this was God telling us, ‘Don’t wait,’” his wife continued.

The Chesters felt an affirmation in that the day officials came to their house to do their home study, Chester, who had been unemployed for many months, received word he had a full-time job.

The couple initially thought they wanted a younger child—an infant preferably, but possibly a child as old as 8 years old. Later, they decided they would like a child up to 12 years old—Cheyanne’s age.

Cheyanne and the Chesters have been a huge encouragement to others in the church to go through the training to become foster parents, Rogers said. And the church has grown spiritually through the process.

“Spiritually, it is really not something you can describe, but the church has changed,” he said. “It may come down to the thought if we can’t help the least of these in this world, and the Cheyannes of this world are essentially helpless, then why are we here.”

Stephanie Fagins, who also is going through the training with her husband, said she has noticed a greater willingness to get involved in all the ministries of the church.

“The heart for service has increased,” she said. “Instead of 10 percent of the people doing all the work, it’s more like 98 percent of the people are involved.”

Orchard Road wants to become known as a resource for foster parents, Rogers said.

He wants families in the area who are foster parenting or considering it to know that his church is available to them.

“We want to grow and become known as a church for people who want to go through the process but not have to go through it alone,” he said.

“They don’t have to become members, but we prefer they do—not because we want huge numbers, but so we can add another level of accountability and also someone to come to when things come up that maybe weren’t expected.”

While some may feel that it’s unusual for a church to focus so much on foster parenting, Rogers believes his church is just trying to be obedient.

“It’s opened up another ministry for us to minister to the people and let them know that this is a place where they can find help and love,” he said.

“We didn’t want to be like everyone else, and we were looking for God to put something special on our hearts to do. This ministry reflects us trying to be obedient to the path God has put before us.”

Cheyenne and the Chesters are glad he did.

*For more information about the CHILD program, call (512) 438-4516*

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