

Voices: Caring for the vulnerable: Three ways churches can engage foster care

May 29, 2019

"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

God sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:5-6a).

In the kingdom of God, the lonely find family. What role does the church have in bringing this element of God's kingdom to earth? How can people of faith live out the pure religion declared in James 1:27? How can we be a family to the lonely, orphan and widows?

Who are the vulnerable among us?

At the end of 2018, [52,397 children in Texas are in the custody of the state](#). These are the fatherless.

If the biblical imperative to care for the orphan is not enough, consider the [outcomes of children in the foster care system](#):

- Seven out of 10 female foster teens will give birth at least one time before turning 21.
- Three out of 10 males who have been in the foster care system will be in the criminal justice system by age 19.
- Former foster youth are two times as likely to drop out of high school.
- Three percent of foster youth graduate college compared to the national

average of 68 percent.

What the numbers above do not show is disproportionality and disparities in the system, which are evidence of systemic racism. The former is when a demographic is overrepresented compared to the percentage of the total population. This is particularly notable among African-Americans. Historically, the percentage of Latinos in foster care is reflective of the demographic total, but the Latino population experiences disparities at multiple points in the system.

The need for more diverse foster families

This spring, I attended a [Department of Family and Protective Services](#) Advisory Committee on Promoting Adoption of Minority Children quarterly meeting. Committee members reported African-American and Latino children are less likely to be adopted within 12 months of entering the foster care system, readily seen in Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth.

“Most of these kids don’t come from the other side of the tracks,” said the DFPS State Disproportionality Manager Tanya Rollins, commenting on the institutional and historical systems impacting minorities.

“Whatever we do for minority children affects all children,” said Anna Blake, committee secretary and representative from Region 3 (Arlington), noting the need for systemic changes.

Along with white foster families, we also need more diverse foster families that are bilingual and understand the cultural nuances of children of color. Communities of faith can use their influence to encourage that and so much more.

Churches can meaningfully care for the orphan and vulnerable among us

while addressing systemic issues like racism, inequity and a strained child welfare system.

Three ways to care for the vulnerable among us

1. Preach: Another way of saying this is perspective-shape.

We are a people encountered and transformed by love, a love that should compel us to show Christ's love to the world in word and deed. Furthermore, as followers of Christ, Christians can identify personally with being welcomed into a new family.

Unfortunately, this perspective is not always recognized or embodied by people of faith. Church leaders should draw attention to the Bible's theological framework for understanding family as made up of more than just biological ties. There is a biblical imperative for believers to care for society's most vulnerable.

Imagine what could happen if more pastors used the pulpit to focus on issues close to God's heart, like caring for the vulnerable. It's [National Foster Care Month](#), and there is never a better time to start focusing on engaging with the needs around you.

2. Provide: Change can start in your congregation simply by providing a space and time for awareness and connection to take place.

Special interest groups like foster parents can meet in the church building. Churches also can host speakers from the community to do workshops or provide information about fostering.

Designate a foster care point person on staff or within the church body. Many times, churches have only to look within their pews to find someone

who works in child welfare or has experience with foster care and/or adoption.

3. Partner: Churches can partner with families who are beginning their journey as foster or adoptive families.

A local church, with a fund dedicated to helping families with foster care and adoption, chose to support the Lymar Sola family. Without the financial partnership of the church, the Solas would not have been able to adopt their son.

“Foster care and adoption must be a matter of community. It is not just a dad or a mom. It is a complete *villa* that is responsible for being and making family,” said Sola. “This church relieved our burden, facilitated the process and focused on what was really important: our child.”

Of course, not all churches have the capacity to start a child welfare fund or orphan ministry; however, there are other ways to partner with foster families.

Churches can help foster families with home maintenance necessary to qualify as a foster family, or they can provide childcare for parents’ existing children so parents can attend mandatory classes for foster care certification. Providing meals also is a help to families adjusting to a new child. Consider doing an annual diaper drive for a local children’s shelter.

The church is the answer

Pastor Eric Hallback, chair of the Advisory Committee on Promoting Adoption of Minority Children and leader of The Rock Faith Center in El Paso, affirms the efficacy of the church in responding to the child welfare crisis: “We believe the church is the answer. ... When the church gets involved with foster [care] and adoption, things change.”

[CarePortal](#), an online portal connecting churches with verified, local needs reported by CPS caseworkers reports that [churches in Texas who have partnered with foster families have had an economic impact of \\$2,161,938.](#)

It is always time for the church to engage. There are resources all around and within the church walls. We only have to look.

Jaclyn Bonner is the communication specialist for [Urban Strategies](#), a social enterprise that delivers transformational outcomes in hard to reach communities. She is a graduate of Howard Payne University and has worked in communications and marketing with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.