

5 ways churches can support families providing foster care

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November 11, 2014

The rewards of foster parenting are many, but that doesn't change the fact that it, like all parenting, can be difficult and emotional work.

Even those who have raised a brood of their own biological children may not be fully prepared for the circumstances of foster parenting, such as court hearings, therapy appointments, visits with the birth family, medication evaluations, individualized education plans, and the rollercoaster of emotions and deep vulnerability that comes from opening one's heart to a hurting child.

This is why we often give foster parents pedestal status. We assume they must be more patient, more giving, more loving, and more capable than the rest of us. But the truth is, they, like the rest of us, need all the help they can get.

Churches have a unique opportunity to provide this needed support, as well as to help those considering becoming a foster parent to make an informed and prayerful decision.

- 1. Extend new-parent ministries to include foster parents.** Many churches have a network in place to support new parents. This network should extend to foster parents, including those who are fostering an older child. While there may not be night wakings and seemingly endless 2 a.m. feedings, opening one's home to a child comes with its own kind of fatigue.
- 2. Provide hands-on help.** It also comes with a lengthy list of tasks that can make those fostering feel more like chauffeurs than parents. While regulations may or may not allow someone else to drive a foster child to and from activities and appointments, foster parents could use help if they also have biological children, as well as with grocery shopping and other errand running. Empty nesters and college students are especially well-suited to these tasks.
- 3. Facilitate education** The more educated clergy are about the needs of foster children and the dynamics of foster parenting, the more help they will be able to

provide. Pastoral care should include knowing which congregants are fostering and providing them with prayer and other means of spiritual support and counseling. Hosting foster care education classes can help the entire church community better understand the unique practical and emotional needs of foster parents.

4. Offer counsel and mentoring. In this same vein, churches may host information nights on what it means to become a foster parent, and provide counseling and prayer to those who are wondering if foster parenting is right for them. If the numbers allow it, a mentoring ministry can be created by connecting those already fostering with those who are considering it. Similarly, veteran foster parents can walk beside those new to the role, helping them understand the unique needs of foster children and the intricacies of the system they are now partnered with.

5. Join with others. Faith-based organizations [are springing up](#) throughout America to encourage, teach, and support congregants who are considering becoming, or who already are, foster parents. These organizations [have done the math](#) and seen the possibilities: there are approximately 400,000 foster children in the U.S., and approximately 450,000 churches. While foster parenting is certainly not for everyone, these numbers make clear the far-ranging impact congregations could have in the lives of those in the system.

If your church is local to one of these groups, get involved! There are big ways to do this, such as becoming a member congregation; there are also smaller ways, such as hosting a guest speaker or education night, or making information brochures available.

If this isn't an option for your church, consider becoming "the" church in your area that speaks the loudest for the foster care system. Utilizing the outreach avenues already in place, make it known that foster parenting, and supporting foster parents, is a top priority.

God calls us all to care for the widow and orphan. This can take many different forms, of which foster parenting is but one. For those who feel called to serve differently, supporting, educating, counseling, and praying for those who have opened their home to abused and neglected children can be a vital ministry for children in need. Don't be afraid to be the person to get this started in your church. If you don't do it, who will?