Keeping the Faith
Collaborations between faith-based organizations and child welfare help kids in need

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When youth from the foster care system visit the recreation center at Mariners Church for the first time, they usually enter in the same way: eyes cast down, feet shuffling along the floor, disengaged. Then, one of the volunteers from the congregation approaches and says with enthusiasm, "Hey, I'm so glad you're here! Join us for some pizza and a basketball game."

When they return to the church's monthly gatherings for youth in foster care, the same volunteers will greet them with the same enthusiasm. For kids in care, "when somebody shows they care, it is huge," observes Rhonda Sciortino, a member of Mariners, located in Orange County, California. "It just transforms them. You can just watch their energy change."

Sciortino can relate to the foster kids the church has connected with because she used to be one herself. She knows how isolated kids in care can become and how too many of the relationships that they develop are superficial. That is where faith communities can step in and make a difference. "I love the ministries where there is some regular, consistent involvement [with youth] from an outside person who is not getting paid," says Sciortino, who overcame growing up in an abusive home to eventually become a successful businesswoman and author. What made the difference for her, she says, was the handful of people in her life who looked her in the eyes and gave her some of her dignity back.

Connecting with and mentoring youth in care is just one of the many ways faith communities across the country are increasingly supporting children and families involved or at risk of becoming involved with local child welfare systems. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples are banding together to raise awareness about abused and neglected children in their communities who need homes. They are helping to recruit and train foster and adoptive parents and
providing respite care and support groups for existing foster parents, adoptive parents, and people caring for kin. They are donating everything from blankets to backpacks for children in foster care, and providing housing and job training for youth leaving the system.

![Children participate in learning activities at Mariners Church in Orange County.](image)

Historically, religious groups founded and managed most orphanages in the United States. But as social policies and government-based child welfare systems formed during the early 20th century, faith-based efforts took much less of a central role in caring for children. Today, child welfare systems and organizations working with at-risk populations are circling back to faith communities and welcoming their support. With states now working toward mandates to keep children within their families and communities instead of in congregant care, the faith community is seen as a key player in this effort. Faith communities are lending their resources to help systems continue and enhance services for children and families, despite deep cuts to state and local budgets.

Christine James-Brown, CWLA’s president and CEO, notes that two-thirds of the children in the child welfare system are being served in families and communities, yet there is not enough capacity in communities to support these
children through such services as respite care for parents and kin, mentoring for at-risk youth, or available foster parents. "The faith-based community are key players in supporting these families," James-Brown says. "They have the confidence and trust of the people within their communities, and a lot of faith-based communities are doing interesting things to support children and families."

**Faith in Motion in Orange County**

Over the past few years, in addition to their foster youth group, members of Mariners Church in Orange County have been able to make a direct impact in the lives of children within the child welfare system through a mentoring program, summer camps, and a housing ministry that provides subsidized housing for youth emancipating from care. Some of the positive outcomes of the programs have included the recruitment of foster and adoptive parents directly from Mariners' congregation, as well as the reunification of siblings in care who have been placed in separate homes but who are able to see each other at Mariners' activities.

Sciortino recently attended a foster youth group meeting to talk about her own experiences in care. In the middle of her talk, two girls sitting on opposite sides of the room spotted each other, let out squeals of delight, and ran to embrace each other. They were sisters who had been placed in different foster homes and were seeing each other for the first time in months. "It was so beautiful to see those two connect to each other," Sciortino recalls. Mariners' efforts have been made possible through a partnership with the Orange County Social Services Department's Children and Family Services Division, which has identified and given permission to youth to participate in Mariners' ministries. About five years ago, the department developed an initiative called Faith in Motion as a way to directly collaborate with the faith communities in Orange County, such as Mariners, to recruit foster and adoptive families. Today, the department is actively working with about 65 congregations of all different faiths within the county.

"This has become our primary recruitment tool [for prospective foster and adoptive parents] through Faith in Motion," says Tricia Smith, program manager for Orange County's Foster and Adoptive Family Development Team. In fact, Smith adds, Faith in Motion has increased the number of licensed foster parents in the county, despite the Social Services Department operating under a tighter budget.
Using grant funds from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Orange County developed brochures and DVDs to distribute to congregations. They designated three senior social workers already on staff to work with the faith communities, and they organized an advisory council comprised of members from the faith communities to dictate goals for Faith in Motion. The overarching goal they came up with was for every child in Orange County to have a home. "It is great to see all these separate faith communities coming up with this goal and all actively working toward it," Smith says.

In addition to disseminating information about the need for foster and adoptive parents within their congregations, faith communities have worked through Faith in Motion to do such things as "adopt a social worker" to directly meet the needs of the children and families on that social worker's caseload. They've come together to fix up people's homes so that they can take in the children of relatives who need a residence. And they've held collection drives for backpacks, suitcases, blankets, hygiene kits, and gift cards for kids in care.

As a liaison for Mariners Church assigned to work with Faith in Motion, Sciortino says the initiative impresses her because, "It isn't about ideology at all. It's about getting people from the faith-based communities to be the hands and feet of God."

Faith communities have also opened their sanctuaries and other church buildings to Social Service Department-sponsored events that honor and celebrate foster and adoptive families. In addition to providing the space, the congregations have lent volunteers and food, ultimately saving the county money. "If we have a special need, somebody almost always comes forward to meet that need [from within the faith community]," says Gary Taylor, Director of the Children and Family Services Division.

Lynn Young, who works for Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, says Faith in Motion has been an "amazing partnership" that has built a bridge for Saddleback's congregation of 25,000 to become more directly involved with at-risk youth and children in care. Each month, the church sends volunteers to sponsor a playgroup at a local emergency shelter. They also host a monthly workshop, Skills for Life, for about 60 kids identified by social services to work on basic life skills such as relationship building, health care, work habits, and handling finances. "Every time we come back, the kids get a little more comfortable and share more about their lives and listen to us," Young says of Skills for Life.
Young has also seen the impact working at the emergency shelter can have. One teen approached her following a holiday party Saddleback hosted at the shelter and told Young it was the first time she’d seen her younger siblings smile while at the shelter. These simple activities can have a lasting impact on children, Young says, and if congregations are consistent in providing them, "it allows children to see churches in action and to see churches as people, not as buildings."

And vice versa, the activities have had a profound impact on the faith-based volunteers themselves, many of whom end up fostering and adopting the children they meet and work with. Young, who worked as a social worker for Orange County before becoming director of Saddleback's local Orphan Care program, has also been able to work through Faith in Motion to host and train prospective foster and adoptive parents at Saddleback on a regular basis. Additionally, the church hosts monthly seminars called "Thinking About Foster Care or Adoption" where people can get basic questions answered about fostering and adopting.

Down the road, Saddleback hopes to open a visitation center at the church where families involved with Orange County Social Services can regularly meet, as an alternative to meeting at the county offices. Bringing the families to the center would also introduce them to other ministries of the church, such as an addictions recovery program, Young says. All of Saddleback's activities have helped keep the issues surrounding child welfare front and center within the church and "it's really raised awareness that there are kids right in our own neighborhoods who need homes," she adds.

**Partnerships Nationwide**

The partnership in Orange County is just one example of how faith communities are mobilizing to meet child welfare needs. Some faith communities are taking specific targeted approaches to helping families. The Church of God in Christ (COGIC), for example, recently started a ministry called Urban Initiatives. One aspect of the ministry focuses on family life, particularly on strengthening the role of African-American males in the household.

According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, 24 million children in the United States are growing up today without a father in the home. To help combat this problem, COGIC, through a partnership with the National Fatherhood Initiative, is distributing resource materials about parenting to young fathers throughout its 12,000 churches. It is also implementing a mentoring program within its churches called Double Duty Dads, which encourages seasoned fathers
to reach out to a child in their lives who needs guidance, such as a niece, nephew, or the friends of their children. These fathers are also encouraged to mentor other new fathers.

Ulish Booker, COGIC's vice president of families, says that from a biblical standpoint, COGIC's job is to reach out and touch the lives of people, and that from a practical standpoint, the church must be sensitive to the needs of the community and provide resources to help meet those needs. With Urban Initiatives currently being rolled out across COGIC's 12,000 churches, "It's got to have an impact in some shape or form," Booker says.

Nonprofit organizations focused on families are also drawing on faith-based communities for additional support and resources. Amachi, an organization based in Philadelphia and organized by former Philadelphia Mayor Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, is a partnership of secular and faith-based organizations that provides mentoring to children of incarcerated parents. Amachi, which stands for a Nigerian Ibo word that means "who knows but what God has brought us through this child," is currently partnering with more than 6,000 churches in 48 states to serve at least 100,000 children.

In turning to the faith community to provide mentoring, Goode says, "We saw it as an untapped resource. We saw this as an extension of what many of them were already doing." Amachi volunteer mentors are asked to give at least one hour of their time each week, or four hours a month, for a year to a child. Amachi's surveys have shown that two-thirds of the children who participate will improve their grades and their behavior and attendance in school, and 90 percent will form better relationships with peers, siblings, and adults in their families.

The program, Goode says, is "transformational for the child and for the adult." Many of the mentors go on to adopt or become foster parents for the children.

**Looking Ahead**

CWLA recently organized a small gathering of leaders within the faith and child welfare communities—including Sciortino, Young, Taylor, Booker, and Goode—to hold a deep discussion about the pressures children and families are facing today in the child welfare system, how the faith-based community can play a greater role in helping them, and the kind of supporting resources CWLA can provide. "We need to see on an ongoing, consistent basis what the faith-based community
can do, given that many families in need are sitting in their congregations," James-Brown says. "How do we give them the information and tools to be supportive of the people in their own congregations and then extend that to the rest of the community?"

CWLA staff are exploring ways to update CWLA's kinship care curriculum, PRIDE training materials, and fatherhood resources to include guidance for working with faith-based groups. James-Brown says another logical step is to have a larger meeting of groups to discuss the things they are doing around supporting a family-centered, community-based child welfare system.

Sciortino says she is working on a committee of Faith in Motion volunteers that is looking at creating a national movement of faith communities partnering with child welfare systems. Many groups across the country are doing good things or looking to expand what they are doing to help children and families, and she suspects many of them may be reinventing their own programs. She would love to see a centralized website where faith groups from around the country could share what they are doing to support children and families and give guidance to those groups that want to get started. People need "meaningful, measurable action steps," Sciortino says, and when given those steps, "everybody can do something."

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