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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

STEWARDSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY: PREVENTING REVICTIMIZATION IN FOSTER CARE

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Abstract

Each year hundreds of thousands of children are abused by adults responsible for their care. Among these adults are persons whom are given stewardship and moral responsibility over the life of a child. We have excellent opportunities as service providers to make a difference in the life of a child as well as help them to rewrite their own history. Foster care is used as a strategic prevention option to prevent further revictimization. It's definitely a viable option and works to the betterment of children. However, studies show that the very option our state agencies rely on is one of the institutions that continue to fail our youth. It is my attempt to put the issue of revictimization on our moral radars as an injustice. Because, until our children are safe everywhere, the safety of all children is at stake.

Revictimization is a subtle yet profound public health concern. The subtlety of this offense occurs way too often among the people or institutions we depend on to provide care. These violations include but are not limited to physical, emotional, sexual abuse and child pornography. To date the US Department of Health and Human Services statistics show that .05% of abuse are committed while youth are in foster care. This is translated

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to an estimated 4,239 perpetrators and 5,133 instances of abuse or neglect perpetrated by foster parents or out of home caregivers. (*Page 41, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003b*) Children have been removed from their primary caregivers and entrusted to a child welfare system that is charged with ensuring safety. Over the last four years, an estimated 1,424,400 children were known to the US department of child and family services who had suffered demonstrable harm as a result of maltreatment or whose health or safety was endangered at the hands of a trusted care provider. It is also reported by the Urban Institute that an estimated total spending (Federal, State, and local) for out-of-home care was at least *\$9.1 billion* (Page 8, Bess. Roseanna, et al., 2002). It would seem that included in this budget would be concrete components for safety procedures and prevention strategies that would prevent any further abuse and neglect scenarios while in care.

The term “revictimization” may be used to describe a series of traumatic events that befall the same person over a lifetime., (*Social Work dictionary, 5th Edition*). A child, for example, maybe molested by a parent, then assaulted by a series of authority figures, then by strangers, and finally by “caregivers”. “Children’s repeated exposure to abuse and violence can have an impact on their social and emotional development. Several studies have linked childhood abuse histories with problems in peer relationships” (Deprince, A.P.(under review). Social Cognition and revictimization risk.) Studies show that over the last five years, incidents of abuse/maltreatment has increased among out of home providers, to include but not limited to foster parents, clergy, youth care workers and the like. The victimization of the weak by the strong in any case, especially among children by adults is of the most shameful constants in human history. How many children are served by the foster care system? Who are they? What are their experiences in foster care?

Scope of the Problem:

Foster care is defined in the Code of Federal Regulations (*CFR*), *Title 45, Volume 4, Part 1355, Section 57* as "24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes. The reporting system includes all children who have or had been in foster care at least 24

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hours. The foster care settings include, but are not limited to family foster homes, relative foster homes (whether payments are being made or not), group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, childcare institutions, and pre-adoptive homes." The *CFR* citation can be accessed online at <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/get-cfr.cgi?>

1. This fact sheet provides the most recent national statistical estimates for children in foster care (*from fiscal year 2001*) and also provides earlier data (*from fiscal year 1981*) to allow for some estimate of trends over time. 2. Data was obtained from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (*AFCARS*). *AFCARS* collects case-level information on all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and on children who are adopted under the auspices of the State's public child welfare agency. States are required to submit *AFCARS* data-semi-annually to the Administration for Children and Families.

While the continuation of maltreatment is heinous in its offense, it is more disappointing and gruesome if children continue to be revictimized by a trusted authority figure such as foster care providers, clergy and most often their own parents. This is the betrayal that causes an unthinkable trauma. Traumas associated with revictimization include but not limited to Post Traumatic Stress, Reactive-Attachment Disorder, Dissociate Disorder, Anxiety Disorder and possible Major Depressive Disorder. Being removed from their home and placed in foster care is a difficult and stressful experience for any child. Many of these children have suffered some form of serious abuse or neglect. About 30% of children in foster care have severe emotional, behavioral, or developmental problems. Physical health problems are also common. Most children, however, show remarkable resiliency and determination to go on with their lives. Children in foster care often struggle with the following issues:

- blaming themselves and feeling guilty about removal from their birth parents
- wishing to return to birth parents even if they were abused by them (*Foster Care, AFacts for Families, @ No. 64 (6/98)*)

Case Scenarios

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Working in foster care has been rewarding in many ways. I've worked for nearly twelve years in this area; I have seen lots of victories in terms of children being able to be placed in environments that provided them with the necessary care, stability, consistency, nurturance and structure needed to assist in transitioning in a healthy manner to the next level in their lives. However, also in the same venue I have seen lots of trauma recreated in foster care and there are many examples through out the nation.

- “In Missouri, the August 2002 death of 2-year-old Dominic James in a Willard foster home has prompted Democratic Gov. Bob Holden to restructure the state's welfare system. The child's foster father, John W. Dilley Jr., was convicted of second-degree assault and child abuse resulting in the death of a child. Dilley is scheduled to be sentenced Dec. 19”. Authorities testified during Dilley's trial that Dominic experienced bleeding in his head and retinal hemorrhaging after he went to a Springfield hospital on Aug. 18. He died there on Aug. 21”. (*News Leader, Special Report Missouri Child Welfare System*) January 1, 2004.
- ”In Florida, 5-year-old Rilya Wilson had been missing from her foster care home for 15 months before state officials knew she was gone. She is now presumed dead. Republican Gov. Jeb Bush has ordered an accounting of all children in the Florida welfare system”. (*News Leader, Special Report Missouri Child Welfare System*) January 1, 2004.
- “In Chicago, a 3-year-old foster boy was found chained by the neck to his bedpost in a drug raid in January. The foster parents were charged with child endangerment”. (*News Leader, Special Report Missouri Child Welfare System*) January 1, 2004.
- “One 16-year-old girl who was repeatedly raped by her foster father in Miami-Dade County beginning when she was 8 years old won a \$650,000 settlement this way, said Karen Gievers, her Tallahassee attorney and president of Children's Advocacy Foundation, a nonprofit organization set up to educate about children's needs.” (*St Petersburg's Times Tampa Bay* October, 13, 2004)
- In one case on file, a girl was repeatedly raped by her foster parents' son for years. Yet, despite two abortions and the birth of a baby by her abuser, the girl was

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- allowed to remain with her foster family. The son subsequently pleaded guilty to criminal sexual abuse and his mother to child endangerment, according to the settled claim.
- in October 1998, range in severity from an 8-year-old boy whose elbow was severely broken and permanently damaged to a 4 1/2-year-old girl who died three days after incurring blunt force head and body injuries. The foster mother claimed the girl had fallen from a bunk bed. *Mareva Brown Bee Staff Writer (Published Nov. 14, 1999, San Diego California).*
 - For half his life, 8-year-old Marcus Smith has had to wear a helmet to protect his brain, which has only the healed skin of his scalp to protect the right side of his head. . . . When he was four, Marcus was beaten unconscious, his skull smashed like an eggshell, leaving his brain bruised and permanently damaged. . . . This would have been more than enough for city authorities to crash down doors to get the perpetrator, except for one thing: Marcus was a foster child at the time, taken from his mother and entrusted to the care of the city. *Bob Port, From Foster Care to Courts, N.Y. DAILY NEWS, Feb. 20, 2001, at 24.*
 - In the Huron County Common Pleas Court earlier this month, Paul Efaw, of Monroeville, was convicted by a jury of voluntary manslaughter in connection with the stabbing death of his foster daughter, 11-year-old Connre Dixon -- who was placed into Efaw's care by the DJFS. Dixon was stabbed five times in the chest on Oct. 18, 2004, by Efaw months after the DJFS placed Dixon in Efaw's care as a foster parent, according to testimony during the two-week trial. Efaw is expected to be sentenced on Oct. 18, the first anniversary of the girl's death. *(The Morning Journal Norwalk, Ohio, Tuesday September 20, 2005, Heather Chaplin Fowler).*

Stewardship and Spirituality:

The scenarios cited above are like flood lights that shine light on the issue of persons that are entrusted to care for children in out of home placements that are damaging, hurting and in rare cases killing our children. While the Administration on Child Welfare continues to work effortlessly to do as much as possible in the area of research, and child

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safety and supervision. This continues to be an on going sad epidemic of high proportions. According to an article published by Life Streaming Ministries entitled (*“Understanding God’s Heart for Children” Engaging Scripture, pub. Viva Network 2001*). they state that “as children are creations of God, the commands that go with it apply: respect, be productive, be fruitful, manage, worship, enjoy, appreciate, rest, and everything that goes perfectly with our creative nature. As adults working with children, they deserve all of attributes through their moral responsibility and stewardship of adults. At the very least, we should not stand in the way as children claim all of the above attributes for themselves”. As we aim to do this, we need to have a more understanding and patient nature with children. We need to understand their thought process, how they interpret things from their point of view, we need to empathize with them which is sometimes difficult for us adults. It is difficult to connect with a child who uses isolation to protect themselves. We need to appreciate where they are coming from, what they have and don’t have.

Taking in God’s perspective, children have innate value and worth before Him. So if we say we worship, obey, and respect God, we should manifest and demonstrate it with our views, actions, attitudes, and behaviors with children. I believe that good Stewardship can be shown through the consistency of our witness. If there is an ingredient that lead children and their parents to a meaningful relationship with God, I believe this is it: consistency of witness, consistency of service even when it is difficult. We should strive to live out what we say the Bible says.

“Every child is fearfully and wonderfully made, unique, one and only. “By virtue of the child’s creation, we cannot add or subtract but only put to good use, develop, harness, and direct towards a relationship with God and service”. (*“Understanding God’s Heart for Children” Engaging Scripture, pub. Viva Network 2001*) They are not any less than any other human being, rich or poor, adult or child....”when you were formed in your mother’s womb, I knew you”. NIV Jeremiah 29: 4-9

What role does Stewardship play in providing guidance for child care providers. As mentioned previously we are charged with helping our children recognize their own

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virtue and to help them understand that they are truly God's creation. Most children in care are disconnected from a spiritual foundation. Therefore it's up to us to demonstrate through our lifestyles that we can help to develop and direct children towards a relationship with God through our service. When we understand Stewardship as our responsibility we will add to the development and overall emotional and spiritual growth in the life of a child. There is a celebration of Family, Community and Culture called Kwanzaa which institutes seven African principles called *nguzo saba* principles and the one that stands out when I think of stewardship is the principle KUUMBA (creativity) which means: to do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our children and communities more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited them. Stewardship is about our obligation to leave our children in care more beautiful and beneficial than when we first entered their lives.

“Stewardship is deliberate and intentional. It is the understanding that we are part of God's creation, and compelled to care for all of His creation. In this sense, we are called to be good stewards of all of the gifts that have been given to us both as a global family that cares for the Earth, and the people on it, as a nation, community, family, and as individuals. This includes our health, our talents, our property, and our families. Stewardship is not separate from—it is a part of, our obligation and joy of Christian life”.
Joe D. Reynolds, *Christian Stewardship*, www.ChristChurchCathedral.org.EducationA.html.

I particularly like the emphasis placed on Stewardship cited by *Joe D. Reynolds. Christian Stewardship, 2003*. We are called to be good stewards over the gifts that God has given us. Any human being who has ever seen the smile of a child or heard them pray an innocent prayer...like “please God help me to do good in school”. There is such a profound demonstration of God's love still abiding with them in their hearts. As social workers we not only have a professional obligation but a moral obligation to protect children in care. However, when we solicit and advertise for foster parents, care givers, etc. we do that with the intent of using every necessary tool, personality assessment and training manual we can think of; there is one limitation with having as many assessments and trainings as any one person can complete, but the real limitation is we can not interview a person's heart. At the core of every being is the desire to do right because we

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were created in God's image and he dwells with us. The impact of the foster child in the lives of foster families can be a stressful life event. These difficult times are often underestimated when the focus is on the foster parents ability to manage other life stressors. These stress factors increases the risk of revictimization. As Christian Social Workers we are encouraged in the word of God in *Proverbs 3:4-6 (Life Application Bible)* to never tire of loyalty and kindness. Hold these virtues tightly. Write them deep within your heart. If you want favor with both God and man, and a reputation for good judgment and common sense, then trust the Lord completely; don't ever trust yourself. In everything you do, put God first, and he will direct you and crown your efforts with success. Social Workers are so over burdened by high case loads and the pressures of meeting government demands that we often forget to seek God in the lives of our children. Without God's guidance and structure in our daily work routine we could end up doing many urgent things but very few important ones.

Embracing Harm Free Environments:

According to an article written by *Daniel L. Daly and Thomas Dowd, entitled "Characteristics of Effective, Harm Free Environments for Children in Out of Home Care", 1992*, they provided a working definition of what a Harm Free, Effective Environment really is. The article states that a harm free, effective environment is one that is not only free from abuse and neglect and in compliance with legal and licensing guidelines, but also promotes children's rights and offers children the opportunity to receive care and treatment that promote spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical growth.

- **The Ideal Foster Parent**

Marketing for good foster parents or out of home caregivers is sometimes difficult and presents many challenges such as finding persons with the right demographics, i.e., housing requirements, income requirements, time and availbity to meet the difficult demands of emotionally challenged children. In addition to the limitations mentioned previously it is often times difficult to recruit persons with a heart and passion that is

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devoted to the care of children. There are a number of qualities that are ideal of a foster care parent, they should demonstrate that they have a heart and is dedicated to the well being of all children, have demonstrated a degree of good parenting with their own children, if there are no children there should be a degree of valid interaction or relevant and effective work with children. Examining the background of a foster parent and looking at their own parenting styles and techniques for raising children. As social workers we often follow the code of ethics in terms not being more bias to parents who share our own values and beliefs around parenting, therefore we must not discriminate against parents who may not share our views of parenting. However, in the final hour of decision making when assessing placing a child we should want children in out of home care to be cared for by persons we would leave our own children with. The decision process can be relatively simple; we must begin to select persons with good values, good social skills, and good parental judgment. While the qualities mentioned can be measured and assessed over a period of time through family interviews, home studies and observation through responses in trainings we are often left not really knowing what kind of situation we are placing our children in. As I have said earlier in this paper it is hard to interview the heart of an individual. To ensure harm-free environments we must ensure that detailed assessments or done. A lot of this will depend on what type of policies and procedures are in place to address any safety risk. The normal practices are to conduct back ground checks, to include history of child abuse in your state. This search should also include any others states where the applicant has resided.

- **Making sure that children are matched and placed appropriately :**

Current methods for placement all over the nation in addition to limited resources can jeopardize the health and safety of abused and neglected children. To ensure that children are securely attached to care givers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of their state or until permanency is achieved. A number of characteristics associated with successful parenting included earlier in this paper directly correlates with their ability to be sensitive toward the child, accept the child for who they are, being able to respond to emotional needs appropriately, sensitive proactive parenting around issues with birth families, active parenting around education, and activities, being

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able to create good boundaries-firm supervision, and enjoying the challenge of changing a life. Sensitivity may seem like a simple quality but it can be challenging to understand a child who does not want to be understood. Accepting a child for who they are is made harder by children who challenge and provoke rejection. When matching children in foster care the care givers should be well versed in the issues with birth family culture. This will require having the balance to accept the child's, strengths, difficulties, child's identity, and ethnicity. Matching can be a difficult process when a child has to be placed under a crisis circumstance. A lot of the follow up necessary to implement a safe environment is often lost. If it is discovered that the match is not a good one with the foster parent, the journey to achieving stability is not easily accomplished. Foster parents who can develop a good working relationship with child's social worker is also a great benefit and vice versa. The social worker should be well versed on child's needs. This means that both parties should be well informed, reliable, accessible, relationships should be built on mutual trust. Detailed information about children will help maximize the possibility of a successful match. Detailed information should also be provided to the agency on the foster parents. This is a very general approach to making sure that children are placed appropriately but should be noted that the needs of small children often differ from the needs of adolescents and the flow of information would have to be curtailed to meet the needs of the age group.

The need to have a defined model of care:

For many years I worked in and out of social service agencies not really having a defined system of care for preventing the continued maltreatment of children in out of home care. When we talk about a system of care I am referring to a set of clear policy and procedures to assist in being proactive when certain issues are raised by the child or in the home it self. A model of care becomes the language for the agency it is the Stewardship policy over what has been entrusted to us. It provides care givers, social workers and the like with a consistent model to follow and should address common scenarios that involve effective treatment of children. For instance during my various experiences in child welfare, I was employed at a group home in Morgan Hill California where there were children who were placed in the home that had gang affiliations. There was lots of

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language used, in addition to visible paraphillia, gang signs and colors used by the kids almost daily. There was not a gang policy in place to deal with issues with tattoos, language, signs etc. A model of care would have prevented the evacuation of most of the children and staff on a Saturday morning when we didn't realize how far a conversation had gone with one of the kids and a phone contact they had with a rival gang member. A model of care would have provided preventive measures in dealing with undesirable behavior and overt issues related to possible gang violence. Instead we were forced to react. If care givers are clear about what is expected and about how treatment should be implemented in the home there is a better chance for safety and overall success of any program. People tend to respond to difficult situations in a more confident and proactive way when procedure and roles aren't ambiguous. Not only will parents feel successful but children will feel safe and cared for knowing that there is a standard for accountability. Children in care develop long term anxiety (which could be viewed as another form of revictimization) when they aren't sure of roles or are uncertain about what to expect during difficult times in their lives. Children should also be taught the model of care so that they too can understand the expectations and be fully aware of their rights as youth in out of home placements.

- **Systematic approach to investigate inappropriate care giver behavior .**

An effective model of care also needs a system to detect any further abuse or neglect issues. One philosophy that I adhere to is the slogan used by Missing and Exploited Children's Campaign "a child should be seen and heard". Therefore all allegations of inappropriate behavior should be investigated. No matter how insignificant the allegations it would warrant some examination. Often the seemingly small allegation such as, a child reporting that they didn't get to eat dinner with the rest of the family and did not receive the same proportions as the rest of the family. While this sounds like a viable report by a child all of the components around this incident may need to be explored. If the model of care is a family style environment then having the child not participate in family dinner would suggest that the model of care is not being carried out in the home. An investigation would probably show that: when youth was having dinner with the family he began spitting food back into his plate at the dinner table,

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therefore the foster parent would have to implement an immediate consequence to stop the behavior. Smaller portions for this child may have come from the fact that the child have often not finished his food claiming that it was too much for one sitting. While issues like these are valid and needs to be examined by parties not associated with the every day case management the social worker gets an opportunity to help the foster parent learn different skills that would assist in helping the child develop better coping skills and learn appropriate table manners. However, being removed from the rest of the family could re-introduce them to a form of revictimization if we are not clear about how separation affects this particular child. There should be an internal system that is designed to take the pulse of every child in care. This could be implemented by consistent, confidential interviews conducted with the child in a natural setting. This could be done every six months. This method will give the child and opportunity to respond to issues that he may not be comfortable stating in other settings. What we do in the investigation process should avoid more serious incidents.

Conclusion:

Foster care is often used as a strategy for prevention of further victimization. It is one of the most viable options for youths committed to the child welfare system and it has proven to work toward the betterment of children in out-of-home placements.

Stewardship is not only about subduing or controlling those things entrusted to us, but also about ensuring that we watch over, protect, love, nurture, guide and cultivate all that has been given to us. God says in his word “Give and it shall be given unto you pressed down, shaken together, and running over.” What are we giving to our children? What lives are we living before God and his witnesses? At the end of the day, I lie in bed feeling good about the lives I have touched throughout the day, and it helps me to know that perhaps I have imparted something that will help a hurting child feel their worth and also feel empowered to move on from a place of hurt, pain and dissolution. I have shared some wonderful experiences with foster parents over the last decade. I have made myself one with their struggle, and I have found that they too face significant challenges in attempting to rear children who are deeply hurt and damaged. Yet, despite it all, foster parents find the warmth in their hearts to persevere through the bureaucracy, policies and

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procedures, and sometimes, the failed attempts to make a difference. At the end of the day, what's most important is that you ensure that all that you touch, you change, and all that you change, changes you. Let those changes made in you bring you closer to God. Be satisfied doing His work, and you will surely be rewarded with the satisfaction of knowing that you are a true servant of God. Then, you can be content with the knowledge that there is lasting truth in the fact that you will be counted among those whom God can trust!

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