Among the wide variety of fields of social work practice one of the most complex and challenging is child welfare. With the specter of abused and neglected children and the complications of working with multiple systems, this field of practice faces additional values questions and emotional dilemmas beyond the normal clinical and policy challenges for the social worker. Also, significantly for social workers, child welfare agencies are among the few places in which social work is the predominant profession. All social workers have a professional and legal responsibility to recognize and report suspected child maltreatment. Therefore all social workers, whether employed in child welfare or not, need to have some knowledge about child abuse and neglect and the systems designed to respond to it.

There is a strong, positive relationship between child welfare and religion. Compassion for children and a commitment to family life are common ground between the Christian community and professionals concerned about the well-being of children. But there is also a degree of tension. Some in child welfare might question the church’s vigilance in protecting children from abuse or neglect, as demonstrated by the sexual abuse of children by clergy or other religious authority figures. Some might view various religious viewpoints as encouraging parents to be abusive and practice severe physical punishment in disciplining children. Conversely, religious people might be suspicious of the state’s role and potential intrusiveness in parenting as it may seem to interfere with the autonomy and perhaps integrity of the family. Christian social workers in child welfare might find themselves in situations in which there is a shared concern for children and families but misunderstanding and, at times conflict, between the child welfare system and religion.

This chapter will begin with a brief history of child welfare practice, a description of the services currently in place, and an overview of the goals of the child welfare system. The congruence and tensions between Christianity and child welfare practice will then be explored. There will be a special focus on the role of religion in foster care practices.
History

A rudimentary system of child protection and child welfare began in the earliest days of the United States, as society responded to children who were orphaned or abandoned by their parents. Primarily, children were placed in congregate care facilities—orphanages—for at least part of their lives to be raised under adult protection and supervision. However, there were a number of other responses to caring for mistreated or abandoned children. For example, in the mid-1800s Charles Loring Brace developed Orphan Trains to transport and place young children and sibling groups from Eastern cities with potential adoptive parents in the Midwest and West (Cook, 1995).

In 1873, a child protection system was launched by the case of Mary Ellen in New York City. The young girl was repeatedly beaten by her stepmother, and a friendly visitor tried to intervene to protect the child. There was no agency charged with protecting children from intrafamily abuse, so the case was investigated by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Soon after presenting this case in court, a private agency, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was created. By the mid-1900s the function of child protection was accepted by public child welfare agencies (Costin, 1991).

Also in the early 1900s the use of orphanages began to be replaced by volunteer foster families recruited to take in mistreated children. By the 1950s, these foster homes had become the preferred placement, and they remain so today. The use of foster homes provided a family-like setting for vulnerable children. However, concern was expressed about the length of time children remained in temporary foster care, and the impact of separations and loss upon children. Research and practice experience pointed to the harmful effects of drifting in foster care with no permanent placement for the child. This drift could be compounded by multiple placements for the same child, and inattentiveness to the needs of the child once in the foster home.

After three decades of documenting the placement of children in foster care and the length of the time that children spent in out-of-home care, the federal permanency planning law was passed in 1980. This law (Public Law 96-272) established permanency planning as the prevailing philosophy, value and strategy for child welfare. In the early 1990s, a growing commitment to family preservation – a specific commitment to keeping families together – evolved through family support legislation and funding to prevent the unnecessary placement of children in out-of-home care. In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed by Congress. This law established some limitations on mak-
ing reasonable efforts to reunite families, shortened time frames for permanency planning, and encouraged adoptions and kinship care.

Throughout the development of this system in the United States the church played a prominent role as sponsor and auspices for private child welfare services (Garland, 1994). Initially, many of the original orphanages and asylums were administered by various religious denominations. Over time, churches and their affiliate agencies have adjusted to the shifts in child welfare by providing required services, either by government contract or private practice. Currently, many of the foster care and adoptive placing agencies in the United States are affiliated with the religious sector, including such examples as Bethany Christian Services, Catholic Social Services, and Lutheran Social Services.

Range of Services in Child Welfare

The child welfare system in the United States has evolved to include a number of services in a continuum of care, which address a progression of severity, treatment need, service commitment and cost from one service level to the next. This continuum includes:

- **Family Support Services**: Counseling and other concrete services that provide supportive assistance to a family. Many cases involve a response to crisis or a lack of resources needed to reduce the risk of harm to the children.

- **Child Maltreatment Prevention Programs**: Counseling and other services designed purposely to address and reduce the risk of child abuse or neglect.

- **Family Preservation Services**: Short-term and oftentimes intense services targeted to families that are experiencing a crisis that can potentially result in serious harm to the child, resulting in out-of-home placement.

- **Crisis Nurseries/Respite Care**: Special projects to provide relief for overstressed parents who need to have some immediate and short-term assistance to provide some time away from their children/infant.

- **Emergency Shelters**: Homes or housing facilities with the capacity to provide care for children for a number of days or weeks who are in need of quick removal from a dangerous setting. These shelters could have a diagnostic capacity to determine the special needs of children awaiting placement in another setting. The shelter could be a transitional setting providing an interim place-
ment for a child while a proper setting is developed or identified. Children may be reunited with their families after assessment of the family and the introduction of needed services.

- **Foster Care**: Family homes providing temporary care for children who are unable to be with their parent(s). Foster homes are provided by volunteer families who are generally licensed and supervised by a licensing agency, and are provided a modest stipend to meet the expenses associated with the child in care. Children generally enter foster care by order of family or youth court in response to a petition from a protective services worker alleging child abuse or neglect.
  - Relative or kinship placement is often available when a relation or member of the family’s fictive kin is able to provide a safe and suitable home for the child.
  - Specialized therapeutic foster homes are designed for children and youth with specific emotional and mental health challenges that require the special supervision and treatment resources that trained parents and professional staff can provide.
  - Voluntarily placement is also an option, through an agreement between the child’s parents and the child welfare agency.

- **Group Homes**: Congregate care facilities that provide a home-like atmosphere for a small number of youth, supervised by live-in “house parents” or rotating staff members.

- **Residential Treatment Facilities**: Providing housing, education, and counseling for young people in a congregate care setting that may be organized around dormitories or cottages. Residential treatment facilities are often responsible for helping young people with complex challenges including emotional, mental health, and educational or developmental disabilities.

- **Adoption Services**: When it is determined that children cannot be reunited with their family, the legal system may terminate parental rights or parents may voluntarily relinquish their rights and the child welfare agency seeks to find an adoptive family for the child.

The child welfare system encompasses a number of varied services and settings that are designed to separately meet the child and family’s needs or provide a continuum of care if the child’s needs change or intensify over time. A number of relatively new strategies to work with children and families have been introduced in the past decade, including family group decision-making, mediation, and managed-care models of service delivery. Regardless of the setting or strategy, the American child welfare setting has a number of primary goals in service provision.
Goals

Child Welfare in America has three primary goals: (1) ensuring the safety of the child; (2) working to secure permanency for children; and (3) strengthening the child’s well being while the child is under the agency’s supervision (Williams, 1996).

The first goal of child welfare is the physical safety of the child. The Child Protective Service division of the public child welfare agency is charged with responding to reports from the public and professionals alleging or suspecting that a child is at some risk of harm under the care of the child’s parent or guardian. Threats to safety include physical abuse of children or threats of personal harm, a number of types of child neglect (including physical, medical, educational, or supervisory neglect), and sexual abuse of children. By law, professionals are required to report suspected child abuse, and child protective service workers are empowered to investigate abuse and take steps to remove children from situations in which they are at serious risk or have been abused or neglected. In some states, this investigatory process includes using risk assessment guides, structured decision-making and other strategies to guide the level and intensity of intervention.

The second goal of permanency is defined as providing children with family connections with potential of remaining a safe, stable and lifetime family. The commitment to permanency was informed by the research in child development that documented the effect of separation and loss on children, the impact of a child’s sense of time and its correlation with length of stay in out-of-home care, and concern about children drifting in foster care, particularly at the risk of experiencing several different foster care placements. The outcome of long and ill-defined stays in foster care and multiple placements could include detrimental effects on the child’s mental health and social adjustment resulting in the need for more intense placements. In addition, overemphasizing foster care as a permanent solution to child maltreatment stood to damage the autonomy and integrity of family life, profoundly affecting both the child and the biological family regardless of whether out of home permanency (such as adoption) was achieved.

Based on this information, family reunification became the most desirable form of permanency, provided that the home situation had improved and the risk to the children greatly reduced. If the biological parents were unable or unwilling to provide a safe home for the child, another option for permanency, such as adoption, would be explored. For some older adolescents, a goal of establishing one’s independence after age 18 or a guardianship arrangement might be considered in ad-
dition to reunification or adoption (Maluccio et al., 1986). The outcomes for young people who “age out” of group or foster care are coming under increasing scrutiny.

The third goal of child welfare is to address the well being of children served by agencies or in out-of-home care. This can include medical care, counseling, support services, and mental health issues, as well as appropriate education, recreation, and socialization.

These are worthy goals, but their implementation has often been incomplete, at best. With regard to safety, the child welfare system has been met by criticisms from two sides. Critics have charged that it has either responded too slowly, resulting in children being left in dangerous family situations. Conversely, some charge the child protection system with moving too quickly, without adequate evidence, and unnecessarily intruding into family life and at least temporarily traumatically separating parents and children. The overrepresentation of minority children in foster care could indicate that discriminatory practices have unfairly heightened this intrusiveness into families of color in the United States (Anderson, 1997).

With regard to permanency goals, the failure to implement permanency planning strategies or to internalize the necessity of permanency has allowed children to drift without their biological families and without the connection to parents that could become their psychological family.

The goals of the child welfare system are admirable. Their implementation is essential as they address the basic safety and mental health of the child. They provide a common focus for program planning, clinical practice and professional commitment.

Congruence with Christianity

A commitment to the safety of children, to their connection with loving adults and family members, and to the well being of children seems to be completely congruent with a Christian world and life view. For good reasons the churches provided early leadership in providing child welfare services. For a Christian social worker, working with vulnerable children and families would appear to be a natural expression of one’s Christian beliefs and values.

The faith of the Jewish nation, its relationship with Jehovah, and its value on human life contrasted with the idolatry in Canaan where some worshipped Molech and required the human sacrifice of children. In Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 19:13-15), Jesus welcomed young children who were being kept away by the disciples. He spoke of the need to become like little children with an innocence of faith and response to the gospel (Matthew 18:2-6).
The connection between children and parents in families was respected and valued. When Jesus saw the grieving widow at Nain following the casket of her son he understood her need for family and the importance of the parent and child relationship (Luke 7:11-17). This was also evidenced in other miraculous actions, including raising the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:40-56). Among his final words on the cross, Jesus was concerned about his mother and proclaimed that John and Mary were to be as parent and child—preserving family ties and relationships (John 19:25-27). Throughout scripture there is the admonition to be sensitive to and assist the fatherless and the orphaned (for example, James 1:27). One of the most serious threats by Jesus in his teaching was the warning against causing the stumbling of a child (Matthew 18:4-6).

It is consistent with scripture and the example of Jesus to be concerned with the safety and well-being of children and to strengthen their connections to family. Efforts at family preservation, assisting orphans and the fatherless, serving the children most at risk, including reducing their chances of turning toward crime or substance abuse, are laudable tasks for child welfare agencies.

### Tensions with Christianity

There may be significant challenges for Christians in integrating social work practice and their faith and belief systems. This is complicated by the potential negative contribution of distorted religious beliefs and practices to child and family well-being. Due to the recent revelations of harmful abuse of children perpetrated by religious leaders, the connection between religious faith, parenting, and maltreatment has become more complicated.

Genuine Christian compassion for the well being of children seems natural based on the compassionate example of Jesus, the Christian ethic of love, and specific scriptural admonitions to care for children without parents or basic necessities. However, historically there have been a number of areas in which there was tension between the professional child welfare community and religion. Several topics of tension include: (1) the definition of child abuse and neglect; (2) the causes of child maltreatment; and (3) between worldviews.

1. **Definition**: In the United States there is no nationally accepted child abuse and neglect law or definition. Definitions of abuse and neglect vary from state to state, and are oftentimes general and vague, thus allowing multiple interpretations of conditions described as “harm” and “injury”. This lack of clarity reflects a conflict of values, or at least dif-
ferring viewpoints, with regard to parenting and discipline. The sanctity of the home and parents’ rights to raise their children in the manner they choose may be in conflict with the value of protecting children from harm, and society’s obligation to protect children and monitor parenting on behalf of children. For example, while for some parents it is considered traditional and quite normal to use physical discipline to correct a child, to Protective Services workers, any discipline which leaves a visible mark on a child might be considered child abuse.

Consequently, within a community it is possible to find those who define abuse as significant injury that is life threatening or results in wounds and broken bones; others might define any physical punishment as abusive. It is on this point that some criticize religion as allowing, if not promoting child abuse. The frequently cited “spare the rod and spoil the child” is viewed with concern by some child welfare professionals and yet viewed as the literal truth and interpreted as a directive to hit their children by some religious persons (Meier, 1985; Radbil, 1974). In the public sector, corporal punishment is sometimes viewed as child abuse. Although few, if any, Christians would argue that the Bible promotes excessive or injurious physical punishment, the child welfare professional might be concerned about the support of physical punishment and failure to sufficiently warn against excessive punishment (Dobson, 1970; Lovinger, 1990; Wiehe, 1990). Defining only extreme, life endangering physical harm as abuse (particularly combined with a belief that child abuse could not occur in a Christian family) could lead to the failure to recognize and respond to potentially harmful situations (Pagelow & Johnson, 1988).

Specific areas of concern involving religion and child maltreatment have also been identified. In the mid-1980’s the American Humane Association began to collect information on child abuse and neglect in cults and religious sects (AHA, 1984). Issues of medical neglect by parents who failed to secure critical medical treatment due to the family’s religious beliefs have also been identified (Anderson, 1983; Bullis, 1991).

Conversely, many supporters of Biblical teachings point to a range of perspectives on Biblical passages that provide instruction in the raising of children. They argue that the abuse of children (or women) is not condoned (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 1989; Campbell, 1985; Tomczak, 1982). While acknowledging the authority of parents and the necessity to discipline children, there is also the admonition to love children and not provoke children to wrath due to one’s parenting behavior.

Finally, attentiveness to the physical and psychological needs of children and families as well as the spiritual needs of parents and children does not have to be neglected or separated from its real life consequences.
For example:

In a child abuse investigation, the worker discovered that a father had sexually mistreated his teenage son and daughter. The children were picked up at their Christian school and placed in emergency foster care. The worker immediately scheduled an appointment to meet with the parents.

During this first interview, the father told the worker that the abuse had ended in recent months as he had a conversion experience and was now a genuine Christian. The worker expressed appreciation for this decision by the father but stated that the father’s statement of belief needed to be demonstrated consistently by his actions. The father responded “Yes! Faith without works is dead!” With his wife’s support and the worker’s support, the father confessed his guilt in court, entered counseling, apologized to his children, and visited his children, who remained in foster care while he followed the court’s order and case plan. Within six months, the family was successfully reunited as the father completed all required actions. Continued monitoring confirmed the father’s change and the young peoples’ safety.

2. Causes of maltreatment: Broader than the issue of physical punishment, religion has been portrayed as providing the context or belief system that contributes to child abuse and neglect (Garbarino & Ebata, 1983; Garbarino & Gilliam, 1980). A number of theories of child abuse point to the role of an authoritarian or patriarchal family structure in creating an atmosphere in which children (and sometimes women) are viewed as subservient to fathers and husbands (Horton & Williamson, 1988; Peek, Lowe, & Williams, 1991). Equating patriarchy with authoritarian parenting styles, some express concern about physical abuse of children, emotional abuse or neglect, and a climate in which child maltreatment is justified or allowed. The child is expected to be obedient to the parent (Alwin, 1986). He or she is not allowed to display a “willful spirit” (Fugate, 1980; Hutson, 1983). The shaping of the child’s will (sinful nature) and spirit, and discipline required for achieving maturity need to be firmly enforced by the parent (Hyles, 1974; Rice, 1982; Williams & Money, 1980). The implied relationship between patriarchal excess and child maltreatment is particularly noted in cases of child sexual abuse as the father or stepfather’s actions are described as related to one’s sense of power or powerlessness in the family and community (Pellauer, Chester, & Boyajian, 1987). Parental actions are justified as preserving a family hierarchy, breaking the child’s willful spirit, or re-
sponding to the child who is born in sin and needs to learn submission to authority (Walters, 1975).

3. **Worldviews:** The first two dynamics – supporting physical punishment and providing a belief system conducive to child maltreatment – sometimes portray religion as part of the child abuse problem. The “worldview” issue describes religion as irrelevant to the problem of child abuse and neglect. Some would say that the church’s attention to the spiritual world, the inner world, and the afterworld dilutes or replaces attentiveness to the physical, material and present-day needs of children. Consequently, the church’s knowledge of and support for public child protective and child welfare systems may not be present or strong.

**Christian Perspectives on Child Welfare**

In this challenging context of multiple viewpoints on child maltreatment, there are a number of Christian principles and perspectives that apply to Christians working in the field of child welfare. These perspectives include: (1) **spiritual resources**; (2) **social support**; and (3) **a sense of calling and purpose**.

1. **Spiritual Resources:** Spiritual resources for the Christian child welfare worker include the spiritual support for the individual worker that comes from the belief that one is placed in a certain position for a purpose and with certain safeguards. Spiritual safeguards include the Biblical teachings that God provides comfort, direction, and a meaningful personal relationship designed to guide and support the Christian worker. The Bible teaches that Jesus is intricately aware of each situation one faces, and is able to provide the worker with sufficient strength to fulfill the task at hand. This includes the guidance and support from one’s colleagues, supervisor, and other consultants.

   Other spiritual resources include prayer – communication with God about one’s personal circumstances and challenges, requests for guidance and direction, and praying for the well being of children and families. One faith-based residential facility makes it common practice that after the team presents and discusses each individual case, they pause to pray for that youth and request God’s intervention.

2. **Social Supports:** Participation in faith communities can provide social support for child welfare workers. The worker can gain encouragement from others; affirming the person’s value, thereby increasing the worker’s overall well-being. Participation in a faith community can
also provide a place for introspection, self-reflection, teaching, and expression that can potentially enhance the worker’s ability to cope with the challenges experienced during social work practice.

Oftentimes faith communities also provide concrete support for families served by child welfare services by providing such things as food, clothes, furniture and meeting other concrete needs. One of the more significant contributions of the faith community is that of adoptive and foster parents. There are significant numbers of licensed foster parents and adoptive parents whose motives, coping ability, and compassion are inspired by their religious faith and convictions and supported by their involvement within and membership in faith communities. Churches and other faith communities comprise one of the most successful recruiting sources for agencies seeing new placements for children. One of the model programs that promotes a partnership between one’s church and religious faith and the needs of children is the “One Child, One Church” adoption initiative that challenges each church to encourage at least one of its member families to adopt at least one child waiting for a permanent home. This initiative, which began in an African-American congregation in Chicago, has been promoted nationally by the federal government.

Another example of faith-based support are networks of resources for young mothers, volunteer aides from the church congregation that provide home help services to overworked mothers. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, a network of churches work yearly to organize a “Back to School” fair for low-income families, filling a local park and offering everything from haircuts to medical exams to school supplies to new shoes. These, along with any of a multitude of other community outreach efforts sponsored by local churches, stand as examples of the religious community’s involvement in child welfare services.

Significantly in the field of child welfare, there is the formation of religiously based social service agencies that provide an ongoing service to the community with support from one or several religious constituencies. For example, in New York City there are federations of Catholic, Jewish and Protestant child welfare agencies. The religious community has made crucial contributions to services for children and families. Through its educational ministries, support services, and assistance to families, faith-based organizations and congregations provide a significant network and volume of family support services with a critical role in family preservation. The provision of formal child welfare services, such as foster care, group home care and residential treatment, and adoption services is frequently provided by private, faith-based organizations under contract to the state’s public child welfare agencies. These service
providers are essential to meeting the need for placements and homes for children and young people who are removed from their homes or need to be placed in specialized settings to meet the safety and mental health needs of the children and youth.

3. A Sense of Calling and Purpose: Christian workers may be able to draw upon a number of beliefs that could support their work with maltreated children and their families. As part of a larger worldview, a worker would recognize that family violence and neglect can be viewed in the larger context of a fallen world with sorrow and brokenness in primary relationships. The worker could affirm that he or she is in a professional position for a specific purpose—that there is some meaning and calling to their intervention with families. This meaning could be derived from the Scripture's reference to the well being of children and orphans as well as more general admonitions to love one's neighbors. Additionally, reference could be made to a Biblical commitment to individual and social justice. This commitment to justice could motivate one to work on behalf of maltreated children as well as address social systems or factors that fail to support or may actively oppress families. This desire to mend the brokenness of relationships in a fallen world, along with a Biblical commitment to individual and social justice, provides not only the motivation for many Christian social workers to enter the field, but also the means to sustain that sense of calling.

The Role of Religion in Foster Care Services

The child welfare worker and the child welfare agency have to balance a number of rights and responsibilities. In out-of-home placements, this balance includes weighing the rights and wishes of biological parents, respect for the rights and wishes of the foster parents, and respect for the foster child's cultural and family ties and self-determination.

These rights and perspectives raise a variety of complex dilemmas for child welfare agencies in responding to the needs and preferences of the biological parent, the foster child, and the foster parents and their family. If there are religious differences between any of these parties, the question of sensitivity to the religious choices of all becomes difficult to address. Particularly challenging issues are raised when one of the parties prefers that religion not be a part of the foster placement, or when the biological and foster families embrace two distinctly different religious views (Schatz & Horejsi, 1996b).

Cultural matching in out-of-home placement has, for the last twenty years, been one of the most controversial issues surrounding foster care.
Most often discussed is the practice of matching children to foster parents on the basis of race, a practice that has been legally forbidden in recent years. Experts on culture, racial issues, and child welfare differ sharply on the appropriate method for placing children, particularly minority children, with foster parents of a different race. The attention to culture for some time appeared to end here. Religion was less frequently noted as a significant factor in out-of-home placements (Schatz & Horejsi, 1996a). With increasing attention to religion in social work practice, religion is being examined as a significant cultural factor in foster care placement.

It is has been considered preferable to place a child in a home of matching religious values, based on the stated preference of the biological parent. However, in a significant number of cases, the biological parent does not indicate a preference of religion in the foster home, whether this is due to circumstances surrounding the removal of children from the home (including the failure to assess religious preferences and affiliations) or due to a lack of religious preference. In such situations, who is to make the decision of the appropriateness of a foster home in the context of religion?

There are a variety of concerns that foster parents, caseworkers, and biological parents have with regard to foster care placement and religion. Rarely is placement so convenient that Presbyterian children, for example, are automatically placed with Presbyterian foster parents at the biological parents’ request. Instead, due to an ever-present need for available foster homes for children coming into placement, the closest possible fit is attempted. Oftentimes, locating a home—any foster home—is difficult. Also, other variables in placement decisions are prioritized, for example, finding a home that will accept a large sibling group. Foster care placing agencies are left with the delicate task of finding the most suitable home for children coming into care.

Some of the major dilemmas that arise, outlined in the Colorado Fostering Families training manual authored by Mona Schatz and Charles Horejsi (1992), include:

1. The biological parent has no religious persuasion, and prefers that her child not be raised in a religious atmosphere. In this circumstance, which is not uncommon, clearly it is preferable to place the child with a foster family that is not religiously affiliated. But given the high numbers of foster families who have some religious affiliation, there is a significant possibility that matching of this type could not happen without delaying the out-of-home placement of this child. The dilemma for the case-
worker and for the foster parents is finding an acceptable means of both respecting the biological parents’ wishes while not forcing the foster family to alter their own private religious practices.

2. The biological family has significantly different religious beliefs than the foster family. Currently, the procedure for addressing this type of placement is for the foster placing agency to request that the foster family make every possible effort to allow their foster child to continue practicing his or her religious beliefs. In the Colorado Department of Social Services Staff Manual, this includes a foster child being encouraged and allowed to practice religious holidays, arranging attendance at the former church or religious institution of the foster child, and receiving written approval from the biological parents for any type of religious intervention used with the child.

However, when viewing religion as part of the culture of a family, it becomes clear that church service attendance and religious holidays are not the only ways in which religion can influence a child. If a child of a different religious affiliation is placed with a Christian family, for example, in what ways does this shape or affect the foster family’s practice of their own religion? What are the implications for such traditions as mealtime prayers or family Bible study? What are the implications for the foster family’s biological children practices? How does the foster child avoid feeling isolated in a family in which everyone else participates in faith-related expressions that the foster child does not? He or she can choose to participate, and enjoy accord with the family, or be excluded from several of the family’s activities. This can hardly be helpful in a setting where a child is likely to feel some isolation already.

3. The foster child chooses not to participate in the foster family’s religious activities, or ridicules them. In part this follows from the previous section, as an example of dilemmas that arise when placing a child of one religion (or no religion) with a family of another (or no religion). What is the appropriate response of the foster parent in this situation? By what means does the foster parent address these issues such that no religious views are imposed on the foster child?
4. The biological parents object to or ridicule the foster parent’s beliefs. Assuming that this is a separate dilemma from the preceding issue, it could result that a foster child in placement is torn between two parental figures, one that practices and adheres to a certain religious belief and one that derides it. To which authority figure does the child listen?

5. The foster child chooses to participate in or embrace the foster family’s religious beliefs, against the biological parent’s wishes. Most states maintain that the biological parent retains the right to choose the religion of their minor child. Is the child then not allowed to choose his or her own religion? Even if that child is, for example, fifteen years old? How does an agency safeguard against foster parents consciously, or unconsciously, using their position to attempt to convert their foster children?

6. The foster child undermines the religious beliefs of the foster family’s birth children. Whether the foster child practices a different religion, no religion at all, or simply does not agree with the religious teachings of his or her biological parent, the potential exists in the eyes of parents for their foster child to affect the religious beliefs of their own children. Matters become quite delicate when attempting to address issues such as this in a family unit without advocating for a specific religious belief.

Practically speaking, it is not difficult to find examples of value conflicts arising in the foster home. For instance, it may be the preference of a foster family to send all of their biological children to a Christian school. Once a foster child enters the home, several decisions must be made. Does the biological parent have a preference about the type of school attended? If that preference is for public schools, how does attending different schools affect the foster child’s integration into the family? Even simpler decisions such as involvement in mealtime prayer on one hand, pose the risk of imposing values on a child unaccustomed to such rituals, and on the other, risk the child feeling a sense of alienation from the foster family.

Aside from their own personal experiences of faith, foster parents and caseworkers might be encouraged to view religion as another cultural aspect of a child or family, much as ethnic background or socioeconomic status plays a role in defining one as a person. As a cultural part of one’s life, the impact of religion extends beyond formal religious practices and rituals. Values, decisions, moral codes, behavioral expectations—all can be influenced by a set of basic beliefs that are core to one’s religious practices. Examining one’s own values and being cognizant of areas in
which there might be a conflict with those of a foster child or a biological parent is a useful tool for foster parents in gaining awareness of the cultural differences that might be present in the foster home.

Caseworkers, based on consultation with their supervisors and other agency personnel, are encouraged to address the issue of religious practices in the foster home. This may be difficult as workers sometimes think this crosses the boundary separating church and state, or fear that they may be perceived as promoting their own religious values. Religion is to be addressed with caution and neutrality by caseworkers; it is an important part of the personal cultures of foster children and their biological and foster parents.

A Role for Christians in Child Welfare Practice

The child welfare system is intended to provide comprehensive assistance to children who are abused and neglected. The mission is informed by permanency planning practices – the commitment that children need to be raised in families with the potential of lifelong relationships. The Christian commitment to love one’s neighbor and care for the helpless is congruent with this mission. There are reasonable responses to concerns about religion and child welfare that affirm the role of Christians in social work and faith-based organizations and congregations in the community.

Why should a family care for its children? Why should a community care about the treatment of the children in its member families? The Christian response is simple and clear: affirming that children are God’s creation and precious in His sight. Parents are responsible for the nurturing of their children, and that role is honored in Biblical teachings. Additionally, the community’s obligation to provide for children, particularly those without parents, is affirmed in Scripture.

The child welfare system in the United States is a continuum of services designed to support families and protect children. When protection requires the removal of children from their parent’s custody, the child welfare system’s guiding philosophy of permanency planning informs plans and strategies to reunite children with their families. If this is not possible, then the child welfare worker should develop another option that provides the possibility of a home and lifetime family for the child. Child welfare includes a professional concern for the child’s well-being, including the child’s physical health, mental health, educational and social needs.

The role of religion and the church has at times been presented with some concern with regard to the impact on child abuse and neglect and
responsiveness to at-risk children. However, the benefits of addressing child welfare practice from the perspective of a Christian social worker, and examining issues such as the role of religious preference in foster care placements, contribute to greater understanding of the implications of religion in the child welfare field as a whole. The troubling continuation of child abuse and neglect in our society, and the sometimes complicated system of services and strategies designed to respond to maltreated children, require the committed work of professionals in the child welfare system and the support and energy of the broader secular and faith-based community.

References


