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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

**CHILDREN WITHOUT PARENTAL CARE: THE
INTERNATIONAL FOSTER CARE ORGANIZATION'S
RESPONSE- "BUILDING A FOSTER CARE COMMUNITY."**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2008
February, 2008
Orlando, FL**

Introduction:

The International Foster Care Organization (IFCO) has worked in the global community to provide family based care options for children without parental care. There are many reasons that children are without parental care. All over the world many children need protection from all forms of neglect and abuse, often inflicted by their care givers. All too often families and children are torn apart due to the impact of war, disease, ecological exploitation, exclusion, racism, and ethnic cleansing. IFCO has advocated for social justice on behalf of children by promoting foster care. The authors of this paper for more than two decades as members of IFCO, and Christian social workers, have shared in that advocacy, believing in the sanctity and value of the life of every child.

The History of IFCO:

In 1979 Secretary General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim signed a proclamation declaring 1979 as the International Year of the Child. UN member nations were concerned about the catastrophic effects of child malnutrition and children's lack of free access to education. In response to this proclamation, the British Foster Care Organization convened an international conference to discuss issues of child protection and foster care. This historical conference hosted delegates from 17 nations at Oxford University. From this conference, the International Foster Care Organization was born and subsequently registered as a charity in the United Kingdom.

For 26 years IFCO has been a unique organization with a membership of social workers, administrators, policy makers, social work researchers and educators, foster carers and youth. Working side by side, IFCO delegates share information and technology on best practices on how to meet the needs of children without parental care. IFCO has an international Board of Directors-eighteen (18) in total. The Board has representatives from Ireland, India, Canada, UK, USA, Philippines, Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Malta, Bulgaria, Moldova, Australia, the Netherlands, Kenya, and Sweden. IFCO's Board is rich in its diversity, encouraging a robust dialog on the needs of foster children.

IFCO and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

On November 20, 1989 the United Nations approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The Convention provided an international standard concerning the rights and well-being of children. The passage of the CRC was deemed necessary as nations had laws to protect children, but did not enforce them. Immigrant

and refugee children had little if any legal protection afforded to citizenship. Children were the victims of poverty, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Nations had unacceptably high infant mortality rates and child deaths from preventable diseases. Children suffered human rights violations by being forced into dangerous child labor, trafficked for sexual and economic exploitation, and in listed into armed conflict as child soldiers. The passage of the UNCRC provided international impetus to address the human rights violations against children.

IFCO actively works to promote family-based solutions children based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. IFCO relies on Article 19 and 20 of UNCRC to guide its work. The language of Article 20 provides the specific framework for IFCO.

Article 20 states:

1. A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.
2. States Parties shall in accordance with their national laws ensure alternative care for such a child.
3. Such care could include, inter alia, foster placement, kafalah of Islamic law, adoption or if necessary placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background.

IFCO is recognized as a member of the United Nations' International Nongovernmental Organization working group. It carries out global project work through the Training and Development Bureau. The Bureau provides consultancy, training, and assistance to nations wishing to conform specifically to Article 20 as well as other UNCRC articles.

1989 A Pivotal Year:

1989 was a pivotal year for human rights and often referred to as Annus Mirabilis-the Year of Miracles (CNN News Archives). In 1989 the Cold War ended and the Iron Curtain disappeared. The world watched in horror as the doors of orphanages in Eastern Europe were opened. Throughout Eastern Europe university students protested and tore the symbol of communism from their nation's flags. 1989 was significant in other ways for IFCO. In 1989 IFCO convened a world conference in the United States at Eastern Michigan University. McFadden writing in 1991 in the Lasting Connections: Proceedings of the 6th IFCO Conference:

“Through IFCO we have become a global village. Over 1300 participants from 39 countries attended the conference. It was a compelling experience as our global community of caring formed again, for the sixth time. For a week, we were the world. Gathered from Asia, Africa, Australia, North and South America, Europe and tiny New Zealand we formed an international village of people who care about children, and shared the stories of our experience.”

The momentum gained at the 1989 IFCO conference helped to shape the agenda for IFCO's future. Human rights watch groups from around the world spoke out for the most vulnerable. Soon the orphanages of Eastern Europe became part of the world

community. Children were adopted internationally and within countries; foster homes were developed, and the caring citizens of the world responded to multiple needs as did IFCO.

IFCO Today:

IFCO holds as its mission to:

- Promote family-based solutions based on the UNCRC;
- Enable the exchange of information among persons and organizations of different nations;
- Promote foster care as an important type of family-based care
- Exchange of information through conferences and training seminars, consultation, networking, publications and assistance.

IFCO's core value statement:

- Foster care must be an inclusive teamwork effort between the carers, social workers, the placing agency, the birth parent, the child/young person and others who contribute to the child's welfare;
- Respect for diversity is essential;
- Experience must be valued and individual and organizational strengths should be capitalized upon;
- The organization should be open to new ideas;
- Care should be child-centered and family focused.

IFCO is a community that brings people together, challenges divisiveness and trauma in its efforts to meet the mandate of its mission and values.

IFCO's Project Work:

IFCO has been invited to participate in projects throughout the world. IFCO's project work reflects the global plight of children. Consider the impact of war, disease, global warming, exclusion, racism, and ethnic cleansing.

Each year, thousands of soldiers and innocent civilians die, with orphaned children a consequence. In Africa many children as young as 11 or 12 years of age are pressed into armed service as a result of war or civil strife. How can a child soldier, who has learned to kill, adapt to family living and parenting as an adult?

Estimates of HIV-related deaths are around 25 million deaths since the first recognition of AIDS. The United Nations estimates there are 15 million children orphaned by AIDS. There are 12.3 million child orphans in Africa.

Climatic changes lead to storms, floods, and creation or expansion of deserts: Hurricane Katrina, separated parents from their children. For some children it took months in foster care until they were reunited with their families. The Boxing Day 2004 tsunami brought tragedy on an unheard of scale with many children left alone, in the care of other children, kin, or international nongovernmental organizations.

The UN, through UNICEF speaks of the *excluded* children who are *invisible*. Some factors related to exclusion are poverty, geographic isolation, lack of education, child labor, and disability. The UN estimates there are 150 million children with disabilities in the world. Many children with disabilities face neglect and stigmatization. Other invisible children are the millions who are trafficked sexually, often across international borders. The UN estimates that 10 million children and women (with children more than half that number) are being commercially sexually exploited in brothels or on the streets.

In Europe Roma children predominate in institutions or special schools for the disabled. Several generations ago Roma were the targets of Hitler's genocide. Indigenous children suffer the long-term effects of colonization—loss of land, loss of culture, lack of medical care, loss of identity. In the US the suicide rate of Native American children has been higher than any other group. In Australia the infant mortality rate of Aboriginal children is three times the overall rate for children. There are an estimated 300 million indigenous people in 70 countries, who are at risk of losing their lands, their language, their culture and their way of life.

Rwanda, Bosnia, Sudan, Cambodia, and other parts of the world are grim examples of the result of ethnic cleansing, which include the traumatization of entire generations. The December 2007 presidential elections in Kenya has pitted one tribal group against another causing civil unrest of such a magnitude that day to day work on behalf of children at risk cannot be provided.

IFCO works strategically in the international community to intervene and improve conditions for children, such as those just described. The following are but a few examples of how IFCO works to improve the plight of children.

IFCO has regional networks to promote best practice. There are active networks in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The IFCO Latin American network held a conference in May, 2007 at Mar del Plata Argentina. Together representatives of Central American and South American nations addressed ways to implement the UN Convention on Rights of the Child through development of policies to protect children, preserve families and establish family foster care.

IFCO is working in India to develop a best practice handbook for practitioners, and through its membership has established a group home for girls who have been sexually abused. An IFCO Board member and the Training and Development Bureau are working to enact legislation in the Philippines on behalf of street children often as young as six years of age.

In November, 2007 IFCO hosted a conference in Malta. The conference challenged the widespread policy in Malta and Eastern Europe of placing infants and toddlers in institutional care. This was an extension of IFCO's 2004 policy statement: "End Baby Homes." Discussions at the Malta conference created a dialog with high level national bureaucrats, agreeing to develop foster care for infants and very young children.

IFCO has worked since 2003 in Romania to deinstitutionalize children. Once international adoption was seen as the only option, today children's homes are closing and domestic adoption is an accepted choice. IFCO has just completed a year long assessment of adoption practices in Romania.

Many Roma children still languish in the back rooms of children's homes but slowly attitudes are changing. This has been accomplished by IFCO providing on-going communication and training on the importance of developing foster care and adoption. Roma children whose families were the victims of racism are now finding foster families in Eastern European Countries. IFCO is working in Croatia, Moldavia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Russia to promote foster care for Roma children.

IFCO's is working to develop projects in African in response to the pandemic of HIV leaving millions of children as orphans. In Kenya children will be fostered by linking microfinance projects with the care of children. Women are given opportunities

to work in cottage industries, such as making baskets, while child minding as foster carers. This type of placement strategy introduced by IFCO allows children to remain in their communities.

IFCO's individual and organizational members have provided consultation and, in some instances, homes for youth displaced by war. For example west Michigan became home for the Lost Boys of Sudan. This occurred again in 2007 for displaced children from Burma.

In 2006 members of IFCO's Training and Development Bureau went to Sri Lanka to assist in the implementation of training juvenile probation officers. The training stressed the importance of foster care as part of treatment for juvenile offenders. Many of these offenders lost family members in the Tsunami of 2004.

IFCO conferences in New Zealand and Australia worked toward the empowerment of indigenous and oppressed people, by supporting kinship care, social development projects, community based fostering and other ways of keeping a foster care or institutional system from swallowing up the children of the oppressed. Many social workers learned at the New Zealand IFCO Conference in 1986 about Family Group Conferencing. Participants learned how methods of FGC empowerment can preserve families. FGC are now part of the main in child welfare in the United States and the United Kingdom. In a small way but significant IFCO shared in the important exchange of this technology.

The examples of IFCO's project work show how mutual respect, empowerment, and encouragement help individuals, communities; organizations and nations overcome powerlessness and act on their own behalf. IFCO takes on the role of facilitator in

supporting organizations, communities, and nations in addressing their needs for children without parental care.

IFCO as Community

Children in care are not just the responsibility of the government, the placing agency or even the caring family. They should be seen as a treasure of the entire community, both a responsibility and a gift. At the International IFCO conference in New Zealand in February, 2007, both children and community were seen as “*taonga*”, a Maori word referring not only to treasure, but to spiritual force. IFCO began speaking of the “Beloved Community”, a concept disseminated by Dr. Martin Luther King, a civil rights leader of the US, who became a spokesperson for peace in the world. The “Beloved Community” is based on love, and works toward social justice. These children and youth in care, our children and the community’s children, are the link to adult generations and the future.

Children in the world face many tragic circumstances which seem daunting to advocates and the global community. IFCO is addressing many concerns such as children orphaned by disease; sexual abuse/sex trafficking; exclusion of children; refugee children; oppression of indigenous children and marginalized children. In raising children to be part of their communities, we must raise them to be part of the “beloved community” which seeks social justice through love. As they participate in challenges to improve their community or address racism, global warming, poverty in a shifting world economy, they will build identity and self esteem. IFCO’s duty is to create a climate of hope.

Dr. Martin Luther King, in describing the concept of the “beloved community” speaks to the vision of IFCO. Dr. King’s Beloved Community was a global vision where all people could share in the wealth of the earth. Poverty, hunger, and homelessness would not be tolerated. Racism and bigotry would be replaced with love and inclusiveness. In 2005 Coretta Scott King at the Annie T. Thornton Women’s Leadership Conference extended the dream of the Beloved Community:

In the beloved community, the values of caring and compassion will drive policy toward the world-wide elimination of poverty, hunger, racism and all forms of bigotry and violence. The beloved community is not a place, but a state of heart and mind, a spirit of hope and goodwill that transcends all boundaries and barriers and embraces all creation.

IFCO is that community, bound together by caring for children, youth, their families, in this troubled world.

In the Sunday worship at the 2007 IFCO Malta Conference the Catholic priest in his homily and prayers enjoined the participants to act for the good of children without parental care. His reflection contained the following observations. In the Old Testament a concern for the widow, the orphan, and the poor is permanently woven into the relationship between God and his people. Care for the poor and abandoned are prominent within the covenant made between God, the sovereign, and His people, Israel. The widow, the orphan, and the poor fall under the protection of God Himself. The God of salvation invokes the law of charity upon His people, so that they might continuously make present the magnitude of His redemptive grace in their midst. In the New

Testament as in the Old, genuine godliness was to be seen in demonstrated activity. The conference participants prayed the following petitions:

We pray for children entering foster care today, that they find an appropriate, kind and loving foster family to care for them until their birth families or relatives are able to do so.

We pray for all foster children in care, that they enjoy stability and love which is required to build the self-esteem needed to grow into responsible, caring adults.

We pray for more families to become foster parents offering appropriate placements, assuring that each child will have his/her needs met.

We pray for the states and local governments, that they will see the plight of so many of our children whose families struggle with mental illness or substance abuse.

We pray for God to bless all the social workers and staff who make decisions daily and that their decisions will always have a positive impact on the lives of children and families.

We pray that foster and adoptive families and their children receive the support and understanding of their communities.

This is IFCO's message. With this message the work of IFCO goes on, promoting human rights and social justice for children without parental care.

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