



CALLED TO CARE

Opening your heart to vulnerable children—
through foster care, adoption, & other life-giving ways

BILL BLACQUIERE WITH KRIS FAASSE



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2019 by Bethany Christian Services, Inc.

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blacquiere, Bill, author. | Faasse, Kris, author.

Title: Called to care : opening your heart to vulnerable children through foster care, adoption, and other life-giving ways / Bill Blacquiere with Kris Faasse.

Description: Bloomington, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019019123 | ISBN 9780764233340 (trade paper : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781493421831 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Church work with adoptive parents. | Adoption—Religious Aspects—Christianity. | Foster parents. | Adoptive parents.

Classification: LCC BV4529.15 .B33 2019 | DDC 259/.22—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019019123>

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The stories in this book have been drawn from real people and their journeys. Most names and some of the narratives, however, have been changed or adjusted to protect the privacy of individuals and families or highlight the various aspects of the call to care.

Cover design by Brand Navigation

Authors represented by Verne Kenney

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Bill

To foster and adoptive families for older children and children with placement challenges and host families with Safe Families for Children. These families are the real heroes in caring for children, and without them the system would crash. They give of their time, emotional health, and financial resources to help children. Their passion and zeal for the children they care for is abundant. Despite the challenges, their response is “I will care for more children.”

Kris

This book is dedicated to those children and families without a voice, those who have responded to them, and the Bethany staff, who, from our founding, have cared deeply and sought to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Contents

Introduction: Why This Book Is for You 11

How to Use This Book 13

Part One Examining the Call to Care

1. What God's Word Says 17
2. Addressing Motivations 27
3. Determining Expectations 35
4. Assessing Preparedness 45

Part Two Exploring Foster Care and Adoption

5. A Close Look at Foster Care 55
6. A Close Look at Adoption 63
7. A Closer Look at Domestic Adoption 73
8. A Closer Look at Intercountry Adoption 83
9. Acknowledging Loss and Grief 93

Part Three Embracing Family Preservation

10. Tapping into Family Preservation Programs 103
11. Creating Support Groups 109
12. Developing Mentoring Relationships 117

Contents

- 13. Providing Respite Care 125
- 14. Covering Financial Needs 133

Part Four Enriching Family Ties

- 15. Gaining Support from Others 143
- 16. Developing Provision from the Church 151
- 17. Accessing Assistance from the Community 165

Afterword 173

Appendices 175

What Is the Bethany Christian Services
Continuum of Care?

What Is the Bethany Christian Services Family
Care Plan for Adoptive Parents?

Recommended Books for Adoptive and Foster
Care Parents

Acknowledgments 183

Notes 185

Introduction

Why This Book Is for You

Family is God’s design—the place he created for children to be nurtured, to grow, and to mature, whether in their family of origin or in a new family.

In the United States and around the world, however, millions of children are at risk. They no longer have a family, or their family is unable to care for them the way they need. In some cases, children and their families don’t have the help and support necessary to move through challenging times and stay together. Crisis or poverty—or both and even war—take their toll, and children can suffer. The late Dr. Karyn Purvis, cofounder of the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas, called them “children from hard places.”¹

God calls us all to care for these most vulnerable among us by acting on their behalf. That’s what *Called to Care* is about. This book will not only lay out God’s call but will help you discover what answering his call might mean for you. If you’re wondering how you personally fit into his plan for these children, this book is for you. If you’re wondering how you might be called to serve other than as a foster or adoptive parent—although you might discover that *is* your call—this book is for you. And if you’re wondering how your church or small group can embrace a meaningful role in answer to this call, this book is for you as well.

In these pages we'll share about the worldwide effort to support children who are among those the Bible calls "the least of these"—from neglected and abused children in America's cities to pregnant teenagers in America's heartland, from AIDS orphans in Africa to hurricane orphans in Haiti, from trafficked children in Cambodia to abandoned girls in China.

How do we know so much about these populations? Because transforming lives through the call to serve vulnerable children has been Bethany Christian Services' sole aim since its beginnings more than seventy years ago. Bethany's mission is to demonstrate the love and compassion of Jesus Christ by protecting and empowering children and youth and families through quality social services.

Bethany is driven to care for parents, both married and single, and their children who need help; refugees, orphans, and neglected and abused children; and children who have experienced multiple traumas in their lives. Bethany serves people in circumstances that range from heartbreaking to joyous and in cases that move like clockwork to those that are messy and slowgoing. And with every case its staff and volunteers experience God's grace and love through those helped.

But because God calls all his followers to be part of the worldwide effort to help vulnerable children find safe and loving homes, to help them heal from their hurts and traumas, and to assist the families and professionals in their lives, you have a personal call as well.

Yes, you might be called to be a foster parent or to adopt a child. Or you might be called to offer financial support or respite care. You might be called to simply pray. Whatever your specific call, if you're ready for God to reveal it, we believe he will.

We invite you to use the inspirational stories, compelling information, and practical tools throughout this book to help you discover how God has uniquely called you to open your heart and make a difference. The well-being—and in many cases the lives—of the most vulnerable children in his kingdom depends on all of us.

How to Use This Book

This book has four parts.

Part One: Examining the Call to Care describes the biblical call, how answering it differs for everyone, and how we can best prepare before we answer.

Part Two: Exploring Foster Care and Adoption unpacks these two traditional options for caring and their many forms.

Part Three: Embracing Family Preservation outlines actions and programs that help both families of origin and newly formed families stay together.

Part Four: Enriching Family Ties covers how families and friends, churches, and communities can step up to make a difference in the health of a family.

You can read all four parts from beginning to end for the broadest understanding of the call to care and how you might be called to answer. Or you can focus on one part or even one chapter you think will speak to you personally, wherever you are in this quest right now. Your approach is up to you.

Take note, too, of these features:

- **Opening Your Heart** suggests questions or ideas at the end of each chapter to guide you in processing, embracing, and acting on what you've read.
- **Praying for My Call** at the end of each chapter helps you begin asking God for understanding, peace, and guidance as you consider your, or perhaps your church's, answer to the call to care.
- **Appendices** in the back of the book offer resources for adoptive and foster parents and some Bethany-specific information.

Lastly, although most of the stories and scenarios you'll read have been drawn from Bethany experiences, and although some Bethany-specific information is in this book, remember that many organizations, agencies, and churches around the world are answering God's call to care for vulnerable children. Look for them wherever you are.

PART ONE

EXAMINING
THE CALL
TO CARE

1

What God’s Word Says

To fully understand the call to care for vulnerable children, we need to research God’s Word. The Bible calls us to care for the lonely, fatherless, widows, orphans, and the people Jesus called “the least of these.” But before we examine some key passages, let’s explore what the Bible tells us about family preservation.

Family Preservation

Family preservation is highlighted throughout the Christian Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments list family lineages—from Adam to Noah, from Noah to David, and from David to Jesus Christ. The lists of descendants reflect God’s emphasis on preserving family. None of those people was perfect except Jesus, and some of them were downright dysfunctional (think of Judah having children with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, and King David having a son, Solomon, whose mother, Bathsheba, was the wife of Uriah).

Old Testament laws even provided ways for family lines to continue after a man died without children. Consider the story of Ruth

and Naomi. Ruth, a non-Jewish woman, had married Mahlon, a Jewish man, who died childless. The widow Ruth followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel, where Ruth married Boaz, a member of Mahlon's extended family and whose mother was the harlot Rahab who helped the Israelites at Jericho.

Boaz was excited. He said, "I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!" (Ruth 4:10).

All these people were in the lineage of Jesus, showing how God can redeem and use every child and person for his glory.

For Whom Are We Called to Care?

Three passages of Scripture particularly lay out God's call for us to care for the most vulnerable among us—and for us to recognize who those most vulnerable are.

The first is from King David, the beloved psalmist:

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds;
rejoice before him—his name is the Lord.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.
God sets the lonely in families,
he leads out the prisoners with singing;
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

Psalm 68:4–6

Don't you love the phrase "God sets the lonely in families"? That's what we're called to do: set vulnerable children into families that love and care for them. Whether the families are permanent or temporary, the goal is to love, care for, and protect children.

James tells us,

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 1:27

Jesus loved to tell a story, drawing in those who came to hear his teaching. His stories challenged the entrenched thinking of listeners, offending some, but his message was always clear. He told us about the importance of the call to care in the book of Matthew:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. . . .

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Matthew 25:31–33, 37–40

A father to the fatherless.

God sets the lonely in families.

Look after orphans and widows.

The least of these.

All these phrases speak to the biblical mandate to care for vulnerable children and families. All these ideas undergird the preservation of families, whether families of origin or those newly created.

Important to note is that when we reference "the least of these," we're not thinking of ourselves as better or superior, but we're living out our Christian calling to serve our brothers and sisters, equal to us in the eyes of God. "The least of these" are individuals

without a voice, but when they are children placed in a family, they have someone to speak for them.

What Does Serving “the Least of These” Look Like Today?

Here are just two examples of how lives can change when the call to care is answered. In one story, a new family is formed. In the other, an existing family is preserved through a national program we’ll talk more about later—Safe Families for Children (SFFC).

Mai, a single woman, had a busy life, but she also wanted to be a mother. She applied for foster care adoption and prayed about possible placements. Then she received a call about an eight-year-old girl.

“Are you afraid?” Mai asked Katie when she picked her up.

“No,” she answered. That response marked the beginning of Mai’s understanding of how much this little girl had been affected by neglect, abuse, and being “passed around.”

After a brief time away as Mai became licensed for foster care adoption, Katie was returned to her care as a foster and pre-adoptive placement. Mai didn’t know if Katie was hers to adopt or if she would be placed elsewhere, but a judge decided Katie would thrive best in a home like Mai’s. Mai became her mom.

Katie leads an active life—she plays an instrument and is involved with dance, school, and church—and she’s part of Mai’s large extended family and has many cousins.



Holden was depressed, unemployed, and homeless—and solely responsible for his six-year-old son. They had no support system or church family, and Holden knew living out of his car wasn’t safe for his boy.

Though it was a hard call to make, on Christmas morning he called Bethany Christian Services for help. The worker emailed the need to a list of families specially trained and willing to take children into their care temporarily and immediately received a response. The Safe Families for Children host family met Holden and his son at a gas station on their

way to visit extended family, and the boy went with them. He stayed with them until Holden secured a job and housing.

The host family built a relationship with the pair throughout the little boy's stay. They invited Holden to church, and he began attending with them. He and his son still attend, and Holden is closer to God and his son than ever before. What could have been a tragic crisis developed into a transformative relationship.

Look beyond what you might think you know about helping the poor. For instance, most of the people living in poverty are women and children. And a recent survey by the *Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that white evangelical Christians are twice as likely to blame someone's poverty on "lack of effort," compared to non-Christians who say "difficult circumstances" cause poverty.¹

Millions of people are in poverty, yet many of them work as hard or harder than those in the middle or upper classes. This is an example of how we must be educated to fully understand the call to care.

We are also to help those who are particularly endangered. For instance, children and families in refugee camps are malnourished. Many of the children in refugee camps have lost one or both parents, experienced hunger, been raped, been sexually assaulted, and witnessed siblings tortured, killed, and kidnapped. Conditions are poor, and some living there are naked. Water is available, but only if one can carry a five-gallon jerrycan. Refugee camps are like prisons, with fences and gates and nowhere else to go. It's not uncommon for children to spend their entire childhood in places like this. Consider, too, the children and teens who are or have been bound in slavery of all kinds.

Before we move from the biblical foundation for this call to care to what can motivate someone to answer that call, take in these inspiring stories. The first is about a couple who searched for and found the best way for them to answer their call to care, and the

second is a first-person account from a refugee who intends to answer the call to care himself.

Larry and Mona had two biological children and considered expanding their family through adoption. Adoption, however, wasn't the best choice for them because they needed to financially protect the future of their daughter with physical challenges. Then they found the perfect fit for them.

They have cared for nine refugee teenage girls from all over the world, all of whom call them Mom and Dad. Mona calls the girls, who are between the ages of fifteen and twenty, "my kids." They arrived broken, having lost hope, homes, and family members in some cases. Some left family behind, and some arrived ill, but they all began to thrive in this loving, healthy environment.

Language differences weren't the test Larry and Mona expected because the teens grasped English quickly and their agency provided a contact person from each girl's country and counseling with translators. Yet routines like going to school were hard because many lived in refugee camps where their only job was survival. Food was also an issue because many of the girls faced real hunger and near starvation. Mona learned to keep a pot of cooked rice on the stove to help alleviate their fears of not having enough to eat.

"Reaping rewards can take a while," Mona said, "but our greatest reward has been watching the girls change and grow."



I grew up in what I would call "survival mode." When you are in survival mode, your focus is on getting through the day in one piece.

I never had a chance to be with my family; I never had a happy moment when I was a boy. I have no pictures I can look back on and see my family and memories. It's so painful, heartbreaking, and hopeless to be in this position. I wish you knew how it hurts. I wish you knew that I am not a burden; I just had bad luck because of my country and government. I *did not* choose to be a refugee or immigrant.

But I have hope, faith, and the courage to persevere and rebuild my shattered life. I tell my story not because it is unique, but because it is not a lone voice. I am many. I am me, but I'm also those millions of refugee children, teenagers, and adults.

College will help me be successful in studying psychology and international relations so I can become a refugee worker. I know only too well the plight of refugees and appreciate the efforts of various organizations to save lives, making a difference and a future where there is none.

Thank you to those lovely people who opened the door for me and continue to open the door for my fellow refugees and immigrants; thank you for your kindness. Thank you for showing me how to love deeply, thank you for feeding me and clothing me, and most importantly, may God bless you all. Everything you did for me I try to continue to do.

The Mandate Is Clear

The biblical mandate is clear: We are called to extend grace to others. For organizations like Bethany, and for all those who hear the call to care for children, that mandate means specific action to help them. A family is where children are healed. In healthy families, children who have come from hard places can heal their souls, their hearts, and their hurts. We all have the basic need to belong and feel secure, and families provide the emotional security of knowing "I belong." The goal is to be a bridge between children and families in many ways and places.

But no one can do it alone, least of all organizations, and God never intended them to. He wants individuals to answer the call he has for them.

Here's another story about answering the call to care through Safe Families for Children. Note how many individuals and groups answered the call to assist this one woman and her children who needed help.

When Deborah called SFFC, she asked for someone to care for her daughter when she went to the hospital to give birth to her second child. She had no family or friends.

Finding an Answer That Works for You

Bringing vulnerable children into our homes is often our first thought when we consider how we can answer the call to care. Don't necessarily dismiss that potential call until you've taken in the information outlined in this book and explored the options, but we're not all called to care in the same way.

If after careful consideration and prayer you know adoption, foster care, and refugee care don't fit your circumstances, at least for now, consider answering the call in other ways. Here are some examples:

- Commit to praying daily for a family waiting for an adoptive placement.
- Lead a prayer group that prays specifically for those working to protect children in the United States and abroad.
- Offer to grocery shop or pay for a grocery delivery service for a foster family who just welcomed a sibling group into their home.
- Prepare a care bag for a child entering foster care with age-appropriate underwear, socks, hygiene items, and books.
- Offer an afternoon of free childcare to an adoptive family.
- Financially support a family care center overseas, a local nonprofit that helps place children in foster homes, or an organization that helps care for children and families.
- Purchase and pack school items, clothing, toys, and so on for travelers to take overseas to family care centers.
- Serve in your church's classes for children with special needs so parents can worship in the service.
- Support a struggling family through an organization or church.

Deborah met Nancy, who had opened her home to those seeking help from SFFC and had a heart poised to serve. Nancy began asking Deborah about her pregnancy and what kinds of things her daughter enjoyed and liked to eat. It soon became apparent that Deborah had nothing ready for her new baby. Life circumstances had robbed her of the opportunity to joyfully prepare for and anticipate this addition to her family. Nancy began compiling a list of what Deborah might need, and Deborah began engaging in the conversation. The two were becoming friends.

When Deborah came out of the hospital, Nancy and her small group delivered two weeks' worth of meals. Her church provided clothing for the children, baby furniture, additional food, and even clothing for Deborah.

Deborah and her two daughters attend Nancy's church, and Deborah has been baptized. She wrote the agency to say thank you and that she had made friends and found a home.

———— OPENING YOUR HEART ————

- Had you ever heard about how clear God's Word is on helping "the least of these" and who they are? If not, why do you think that is?
- Had you assumed caring for foster children, adopting, and perhaps making donations were the only ways to answer the call to care for vulnerable children? How has this chapter changed your thinking?
- If you see God's call to care more clearly than ever, do you also see it as a call more personal than ever? If so, how so?
- How will you commit to seeking God's leading as you consider your own call to care? Through prayer? Through study? Through conversation with others?

———— PRAYING FOR MY CALL ————

Father, it's so easy to not know, to forget, or even to ignore how clear your call is to care for the most vulnerable in our world. Help me embrace that call. Help me absorb it into my heart and mind and commit to discovering how you plan for me to humbly and uniquely answer. I want to serve you and make a difference. Amen.