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Fighting abortion issue, Christians turn to adoption

Conservatives open hearts and homes to foster children

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In the days before Texas had nearly 19,000 abused, abandoned and neglected children on its foster care rolls, the church often helped take care of orphans.

Now, some conservative Christians say an intense focus on hot-button issues like abortion and [gay marriage](#) has come at the expense of caring for needy children. And they're doing something about it.

Dallas-area families are leading by example – by taking in children from around the world. Parents and pastors are starting ministries. A national coalition that includes [Focus on the Family](#) aims to persuade thousands of churches to start adoption ministries. And the state of Texas is spending \$500,000 this year to encourage churchgoers to adopt and care for foster children.

The push, still in its infancy, could help recast the image of conservative Christians, broaden the appeal of the church and, consequently, find homes for children.

"For the past 80 years, the church has really abrogated its responsibility to government, adoption agencies and others," said Christopher Padbury, executive director of Project 1.27, a Colorado-based group that has placed 60 foster children for adoption in Christian homes since 2005. "God has really taken a sledgehammer and started pounding on his churches."

Mr. Padbury's group is named after James 1:27, which says: "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" (New International Version Bible).

"We haven't done an effective job of treasuring the lives we say are so valuable," said Staci Taylor, a member of Memorial Baptist Church in Grapevine. "I think that's a big point of the church's



SONYA HEBERT / DMN
 Casey Rogers, 8, hugs his little brother Nathan, 5, whom he hadn't seen all week while away at Bible camp. The boys are part of a blended family: Their parents have three children by adoption and two by birth.

involvement. If we're going to talk about pro-life, we equally need to discuss pro-adoption."

She said her mother, who grew up on a West Texas cotton farm, recalls a Sunday in the late 1940s when the pastor held up an orphaned girl. Standing at the pulpit of the church in Abilene, he called on the congregation for help. Members of a church family took the child in and raised her as their own.

Now Mrs. Taylor and her husband, Jeff, have responded in their own way, by adopting Ellie, a Chinese [orphan](#).

"We thought we were finished with our family, but we began to be convinced that children were out in the world who had no hope," Mrs. Taylor said.

Ellie, 2, has adjusted well to her new home. Last month, she wore cowboy boots during a ceremony in [Fort Worth](#) at which she became a naturalized citizen.

"Ellie likes Mexican food better than Chinese food. She's fully Americanized now," Mrs. Taylor said.

And now her brother Sam, 12, and sister, Mary, 6, say they want to adopt when they grow up.

'Significant dent'

The push to encourage church members to adopt or provide foster care could have a great impact.

"If you break it down, there are over three places of worship for every child waiting to be adopted. There are 500 families for every child waiting in foster care. We can make a significant dent," said Lee Allen, spokesman for the National Council for Adoption, a nonprofit research and advocacy group that has signed on to the national coalition.

But at most churches, foster care is "not on the radar screen – yet," said [Michael Monroe](#), a legal executive at Hunt Oil who has adopted four children – two from Texas and two from Guatemala.

He said it's not an effort to further any political agenda on behalf of the church but is a labor of love with "blood, sweat and tears."

Now, he and his wife, Amy, head the ministry for adoptive and foster families at [Irving](#) Bible Church. And last year, they helped organize The DFW Alliance, a forum for like-minded Christians to coordinate outreach efforts.

"It's been amazing," Mr. Monroe said, "to see predominantly white people in a suburban church say, 'I want to get involved.' "

Black pastors have long encouraged church members to adopt because of the great need created by broken homes and a high incidence of births out of wedlock.

"The crisis in the African-American community is so great that we needed to step up to the plate because of our history," said Tony Evans, senior pastor at [Oak Cliff](#) Bible Fellowship.



SONYA HEBERT / DMN
Lauren Rogers, 2, bowls in [Rowlett](#) with help from brother Austin, 11, as father, Russell, cheers them on. "Family values are on the rise," says Mr. Rogers, a pastor.

He estimates that about 50 families have adopted as a result of his church's decade-old push, which includes two adoption and foster care fairs each year.

"You have a generation of fatherlessness where men are not in the home. You can't just say 'don't abort.' You've got to have something else to provide family," he said.

Catholics and Mormons have made efforts of their own in recent decades, said Ada White, director of adoption services for the Child Welfare League of America, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group.

And white Protestants have been involved to some degree in other ways. For example, Buckner Adoption and Maternity Services, which started as a Baptist orphanage in Dallas, has placed more than 4,000 children since 1884.

The new emphasis for conservative Christians is growing on three levels: through local churches, through a state faith-based initiative and through a powerful national coalition.

The national push

A coalition of evangelicals and child advocacy groups is spreading the pro-adoption message on the national level.

- Last November, religious broadcasters dedicated a week of airtime to adoption. [Bill Pennington](#), director of Family Life's Hope for Orphans, estimates the blitz reached up to 10 million evangelical Christians over 10 days. "We were introducing this audience to a biblical world view of orphan care," he said. "This is not just a marketing campaign to white suburban churches."
- For three days in May, [Rick Warren](#), author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, cheered on 350 supporters at a [Colorado](#) summit. The guests included 100 ministers who are promoting adoption from the pulpit.
- Last month, Mr. Pennington chaired a meeting in Grapevine where 10 coalition leaders planned the next two years of outreach.

Mr. Pennington, who lives in Garden Ridge, Texas, with three of his six children, said the effort is a genuine push to help children around the world, not a sly attempt at a political makeover. Yet, he and others note that the adoption initiatives are drawing new people.

The Texas initiative

Texas started a program to get churches involved in foster care in 2003. Child Protective Services calls it Congregations Helping in Love and Dedication, or CHILD.

Recruiters visit churches to train and certify adults as foster parents, with the goal of preparing at least two families per congregation. "It really has been a partnership with these groups who were an untapped resource before," said Marissa Gonzales, a CPS spokeswoman.



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Sean, 3, was adopted in 2005 after being fostered for a year. "These are not fish. You cannot just throw them back," Shelly Rogers has said.

Ninety churches have signed up to work with the state since the program was signed into law by Gov. [Rick Perry](#).

As a result of training sessions in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, 32 families have been licensed and 76 children have been placed in homes, Ms. Gonzales said. Four children have been placed for permanent adoption, she said.

Concerns and stereotypes on both sides – about working with religious groups or working with government bureaucrats – stopped the program from growing.

"There's a tendency for the state to look at the church and say 'Well, they spank their kids' or 'They beat their kids.' But that's not the case. We're all about helping those kids heal using love and logic," said Matt Donovan, who helped start the Foster and Adoption Ministry at The Village Church in [Highland Village](#).

He and his wife, Kristin, have a 3-year-old daughter and want another baby. They cared for a foster child for four months this year and hope to have another child placed in their home soon.

Carolyn Robinson, a [Coppell](#) mother of three, was the first to be certified as a foster parent at Irving Bible Church after three weekends of what she called "very intense training," including CPR certification and a background check.

"We think about the bureaucracy of calling up CPS," Mrs. Robinson said. "They're bringing it to us."

Last August, the Robinsons got their first placement, a 3-day-old boy who is still in their home. "He's brought a lot of joy and spunk to our house," she said.

The local network

Church coordinators are finding various ways for members to help. Some ministries have "respite networks" with volunteers who are certified to baby-sit foster children. Money is set aside to support lower-income families who take in children. Adoption prayer circles are formed.

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Mr. Rogers assists Jessica Clark with paperwork at a Trinity Life Baptist information session on how to become a foster or adoptive parent.

Ministries like Irving Bible's Tapestry sponsor nights out for parents where they can talk about the challenges of adopting or taking in foster children.

"We cannot expect these kids to come from overseas or our foster system and become the model child in the church," Mr. Monroe said. "We want our families to know those are considerations and risks that need to be understood, not necessarily feared."

Church support networks can help families for months or years.

"[Hillary Clinton](#) said it takes a village to raise a child," said Russell Rogers, senior pastor at Trinity Life Baptist Church in [Garland](#) who has three children through adoption and two by birth. "While there's many things Hillary Clinton has done I don't agree with, I would agree with

that."

Mr. Rogers called the initiative a revival.

"Not a church revival with meetings," he said, "but a true revival where we're seeing people's hearts and actions change. Revival can never begin in the [White House](#). Revival has to begin in our house."

Families put faith in the foster system

The Rogers family

Russell and Shelly Rogers didn't have children during their first six years of marriage. So they adopted two – and then Mrs. Rogers got pregnant.

They went through the state of Texas to get their kids and fostered other children to fill the extra rooms in their home.

"My wife said, 'These are not fish. You cannot just throw them back,' " recalled Mr. Rogers, senior pastor at Trinity Life Baptist Church in Garland. "We should bend over backwards to help these children."

The couple have three children by adoption and two by birth: Austin, 11, Casey, 8, Nathan, 5, Sean, 3, and Lauren, 2.

"The idea that the family wants the perfect Caucasian child, and the fear that foster children won't be that, is absolutely, positively not true," Mr. Rogers said. "Our family is a living proof of that."

Mr. Rogers, a graduate of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., and a spokesman for Texas' church-recruitment initiative, dedicates a Sunday service in November to celebrate foster and adoptive families. The service drew about 1,000 people last fall.

"Family values are on the rise," he said. "From a spiritual perspective, I believe God is working in hearts and in lives to bring to the forefront of the Christian community the need for us to be doers of the word and not hearers only."

Will the Rogerses adopt more?

"We're thrilled," Mr. Rogers said, "but we're through."

The Donovan family

It was bedtime in Matt and Kristin Donovan's Coppell apartment. Just after 8:30 on a recent night, the two parents sat with their 3-year-old daughter, Jaimes, and took turns reading from *A Child's First Bible*.

Mr. Donovan read the story of the Good Samaritan. "Jesus says helping was the right thing," he told his birth daughter.



Next to them was an empty crib. From January to June, a foster child slept there until the state placed him with a member of his extended family.

"We were maybe the only people praying for his parents," Mr. Donovan said. "Being part of his story was really exciting. On a personal level, it's such a joy."

Learning about foster care motivated the couple to start a foster and adoption ministry this year at The Village Church in Highland Village.

They've been married four years and want another baby.

"Investigating became training became licensing," said Mr. Donovan, a Web site designer. "We're doing foster to adopt, which means we're trying to grow our family though the foster system. We're OK to see some kids come and go. Our prayer right now is that God will place us with a child who will need a home."

Now, they're back on the foster care waiting list.

The Monroe family

After struggling with fertility problems, Michael and Amy Monroe decided to adopt. Now, as leaders of Irving Bible Church's adoption ministry, the couple are encouraging other Christians to do the same.



"We do this as a way to say 'thank you' for the tremendous blessings we've experienced," said Mr. Monroe, a corporate attorney.

Those blessings are Miles, 6, Grant, 5, Kate, 3, and Carter, 3. The first two were adopted in Texas; the twins are from Guatemala. All four are Latino.

"They understand their skin is brown and our skin is peach, as they say," Mr. Monroe said. "We help them understand that what's happened to them

SONYA HEBERT / DMN in a physical sense is a great metaphor for God taking us in. We're helping Michael and Amy Monroe them develop a healthy sense of who they are, not what we want them to lead an adoption ministry be."

as a way to say thank you for their young blessings (from left): Miles, Kate, Grant and Carter.

Since most of their friends are also adoptive parents and they trek to the airport to welcome new babies, Mr. Monroe said, "Our kids often think baggage claim is the hospital delivery ward."

The Monroes field lots of questions from their own kids.

"Bedtime is an adventure," Mr. Monroe said. "If it's not questions about God, it's questions about birth parents or something. We look at these as wonderful opportunities."

The Taylor family

Since early in their 18-year marriage, Jeff and Staci Taylor have sent \$25 a month through [World Vision](#) to sponsor a child in an African village. But over time, they felt that sending money wasn't enough when millions of children are in need worldwide.

So the Taylors – who have two biological children, Sam, 12, and Mary, 6 – adopted Ellie, a Chinese orphan.

"If I had a house with more rooms, I would not hesitate to do it again," Mrs. Taylor said.

Ellie looks different from the rest of the family, and the clan often gets curious looks in public. "We try to use that to toot the horn for adoption," Mrs. Taylor said.

At school, Sam said a friend bet him \$5 that Ellie couldn't possibly be his real sister. "I won, but he never paid up," said Sam, sitting on a couch in the living room of their home in Grapevine.

Mrs. Taylor is a stay-at-home mom. Mr. Taylor owns a small business. Last month, they formed an adoption ministry at Memorial Baptist Church in Grapevine. When Mrs. Taylor spoke before the church to pitch the new ministry, she wore a special necklace to keep her from feeling nervous – it was a charm with the Chinese symbol for joy.



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Staci Taylor says daughter Ellie may look different from her other kids, Mary and Sam, but "we try to use that to toot the horn for adoption."

Issues Q&A

Church ministries are helping people learn about the risks and joys of adoption and taking in foster children. Here are their answers about some of the issues:

Can Christian couples teach their foster children about Christ?

Yes, foster parents are free to take the children to church. If the child has a stated religious preference, Texas Child Protective Services tries to place him or her with a family of the same religion.

Can you put foster children into day care?

Yes, but not just any day care. Because children in foster care have been in some way abused, abandoned or neglected, the state limits who can care for them. Some churches have created "respite networks" so members can get trained to baby-sit special-needs babies.

Should Americans first seek to take in children in this country?

In the biblical view, all children are equal in God's eyes. While Texas has nearly 19,000 children in foster care, millions of babies worldwide have been abandoned or need care. Conditions in overseas locations are often worse.

What are the risks of fostering?

While a potential parent can review a foster child's case file before adoption, there are still unknowns,

including:

- The baby could have physical problems related to poor prenatal care or being exposed to alcohol or drugs in the womb.
- The child could have lingering problems from being abused.
- The children often come from cultures very different from middle-class, suburban, Christian homes and face issues while adapting.
- Until the adoption is permanent, the child's birth parents or extended family could gain custody if the court rules them capable. This can be hard for foster parents who had hopes of adopting.

How can people help if they can't adopt or foster?

Volunteers can be trained for respite care. They can donate to assistance funds for adoptive families. Or they can be part of prayer circles and fellowship nights to support families who take in children.

THREE-TIERED PUSH

After decades of relative dormancy, conservative Christian churches are getting involved in a broad-based campaign to adopt and foster children.

Local: Ministries are forming at Protestant churches throughout the region. Usually, they are created by laypeople who have adopted and want to create a church support system for other families. Those ministries have formed coalitions, including the DFW Alliance and the Faith Connection.

State government: Texas started a program in 2003 that sends recruiters into churches to train and certify foster parents. The Congregations Helping in Love and Dedication initiative has a \$500,000 budget this year.

National groups: Conservative Christian groups like Focus on the Family have picked up the pro-adoption banner and are organizing national coalitions to disseminate the message. A coalition steering committee met in Dallas last month to lay out a two-year strategy.

RESOURCES

The Faith Connection: A group that aims to raise awareness within area churches about the foster care system's needs. It created a "Heart Gallery" of portraits of children eligible for adoption that will be shown at various churches starting in August. thefaithconnection.org

The DFW Alliance of Adoption and Orphan Care Ministries: A network of church ministries in the Dallas area. dfwalliance.org

Tapestry: A ministry at Irving Bible Church for adoptive and foster families, led by Michael and Amy Monroe.

irvingbible.org, click on "Ministries" and look under "Care and prayer."

The Foster and Adoption Ministry at The Village Church in Highland Village: A ministry created by Matt and Kristin Donovan. thevillagechurch.net

Texas' Congregations Helping in Love and Dedication: A state initiative that sends recruiters into churches to train prospective foster parents and baby sitters. www.dfps.state.tx.us, click on "Adoption & Foster Care."

Hope for Orphans: A leader in the national evangelical coalition. The Hope for Orphans Web site is managed by Family Life, a subsidiary of Campus Crusade for Christ. www.familylife.com/hopefororphans/

Shaohannah's Hope: A Tennessee organization that provides grants to adoptive families and encourages other forms of support. It was founded by Grammy-winning Christian recording artist Steven Curtis Chapman and his wife, Mary Beth, after they adopted three girls from China. shaohannahshope.org

Project 1.27: A Colorado-based foster and adoption placement ministry led by Christopher Padbury and named after James 1:27. project127.com

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