

HELP WANTED

focus
BY MICHAEL MONROE



Tapestry ministry leaders, Michael and Amy Monroe have grown their family through adoption. Their children include, from left, Miles, 7, Grant, 5, Carter, 3, and Kate, 3.

Christian families throughout Texas reach out to help foster families in need

A couple has been fostering for six months and desperately needs a weekend away to themselves. A single foster mom has an out-of-town family emergency. A family of five with two young foster children wants to travel to their oldest son's basketball tournament in another state. A foster parent is drowning in hours of overdue errands and needs time alone to tackle them. These and hundreds of other scenarios play themselves out every day for foster parents everywhere. For a variety of reasons many foster parents need relief and, more

importantly, need to know that this help is a phone call away.

The rules and standards vary by state, but the concept is simple: respite care is short-term care provided to a foster child by someone other than the foster parent. Respite care generally covers a period of several hours to several days or even a weekend. In some cases it can last even longer. Regardless of the duration, readily available respite care for both foster parents and children is important.

THE RIGHT KIND OF HELP

Some have questioned whether

there is a widespread need for respite care. They point to infrequent requests for relief care and to respite care networks that no longer exist due to lack of use.

However, based on the dozens of foster families who I come into contact with each year and the stories of many more foster families, a large number of foster families not only want respite care, at times they desperately need it. In addition, many more people who consider becoming foster care providers want to know that such relief and help is available and accessible if and when needed.



Chance and Shelley Fletcher adopted their son Caden through a domestic, private adoption. Below, Billy and Laurie Cuchens adopted Isaac, 3, from foster care and Vivianna, 1, through domestic private adoption. All of the families are part of the Tapestry adoption and foster care ministry at Irving Bible Church in Irving, Texas.

The infrequent requests for respite care in some areas and the nominal use of respite care networks likely points to the ineffective way such help is often offered and the difficulty that families have in accessing it.

“Finding respite care is a painfully bureaucratic process,” said Matt Donovan, a foster parent in Coppell, Texas. “We need to schedule respite care weeks in advance. If it’s available (and often it is not), it is with people we don’t know. While our foster kids are not our own, we love them as if they were. Leaving them with someone we don’t know feels, at best, uncomfortable.”

At one point the Donovans had to drive more than an hour each way to the home of someone they did not know to obtain

respite care for their foster child for a brief overnight stay.

In many ways the ideal respite care provider for a child and for foster parents would be someone who is relatively close by and with whom both the child and foster parents are familiar. In other words, someone who is already within the foster family’s normal pattern of life. For many, their church or faith community could be a potential source of ideal respite care providers.

IF IT TAKES A VILLAGE, WHERE ARE THE CHURCHES?

The notion that it “takes a village to raise a child” has arguably become cliché, and yet there is undeniable truth to the reality that caring for our children in general, and our children in foster care specifically, is best done as a community effort.



A complex network of social workers, educators, public and private agencies, volunteers and many others are charged and called upon to help and serve children in foster care as well as foster parents. But increasingly many people have been asking “where are our churches?”

While some churches and faith communities have long been involved in serving and ministering to children in foster care, such churches are the rare exception. Yet, it seems that this lack of attention by churches to

the needs of children in care is largely a function of the simple fact that most churches are, for whatever reason, unaware.

Fortunately, the lack of church involvement is beginning to change as churches are working together to raise awareness of children in foster care and the ways people within their congregation can make a difference. Efforts such as Project 1.27 in Colorado and The CALL in Arkansas are church-based efforts that help recruit adoptive families for children

whose parental rights have been terminated and are awaiting adoption. These efforts hope to eliminate the number of waiting children by recruiting families from the church community.

In Texas The Faith Connection at www.TheFaithConnection.org is taking a somewhat different approach, by raising awareness of children in foster care through the use of Heart Gallery exhibits in churches. Since September 2006, The Faith Connection has helped 16 churches of various denominations host a Heart Gallery exhibit and then follow-up with those who express an interest in adoption, foster care, advocacy and many other volunteer opportunities focused on helping kids in care.

Interestingly, in the course of talking with people in churches across North Texas about the needs of children in foster care and how they can best be served, one idea continually comes up: respite care. It is clear that the opportunity to provide respite care is appealing to many people from virtually all walks of life. Their motivations vary as some see respite care as a way to provide practical, hands-on support for foster families in their church, while others see respite care as a way to experience firsthand some of the realities of providing foster care before committing to become a full-time foster parent themselves.

AN IDEA WHERE EVERYBODY WINS

In 2006, several churches in

North Texas, including Irving Bible Church and The Village Church, began talking with Texas Child Protective Services, an agency of the state child welfare department in Texas, and several private foster agencies about creating a short-term respite care network among several churches in the area. Under the new standards recently adopted

“A respite network within our local church community will be invaluable. Easy access to respite care from people who know and love our family will remove a giant weight from the shoulders of many foster parents . . .”

in Texas, short-term respite care for a period of less than 72 hours does not require those providing care to have a full foster care license. In order not to confuse this less regulated concept of short-term care with respite care of more than 72 hours, which requires a full foster care license, these churches have labeled the new short-term respite care concept “relief care” and are pressing forward with the creation of a faith-based relief care network that will eventually connect multiple churches of various denominations throughout the North Texas area.

According to Penny Cook, director of The Faith Connection, faith-based relief care is beginning to catch on because it is a way to help kids in foster care that has obvious benefits for everyone involved.

“It gives families who might be interested in foster care a chance

to serve without having to make a full-time commitment,” Cook said. “It also provides a very valuable safety net for the families within the church who foster — knowing that loving caregivers are available within their church community to help support them. It can be a bonus for the children in foster care as well. It allows them to

have a break but in a way that is potentially less traumatic by spending the relief time with families from their church community.”

Donovan, who attends The Village Church, agrees, “A respite network within our local church community will be invaluable. Easy access to respite care from people who know and love our family will remove a giant weight from the shoulders of many foster parents — allowing us to be better parents and thus benefiting directly the lives of the children we are serving.”

The details of this church-based relief care network are still being ironed out. Critical to this effort at this point is the need to have Child Protective Services and as many private foster agencies as possible agree on a common set of rules and standards that will apply to relief care providers

in order to allow foster parents, regardless of the agency they are licensed with, to access relief care from the church-based network. Even so, several couples and singles have already begun the process to become approved relief care providers — a process that includes CPR/safety training, a background check, agreement to confidentiality and

discipline policies, and a four-hour training course.

As communities in and of themselves and as part of the larger community, churches need to become more involved and committed to serve children in foster care and support foster parents. Respite care is one such way to meet needs that already exist. By working together churches can effectively create a network of help that benefits all involved and, most importantly, serves to further the care and love our most vulnerable children desperately need. ✿

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael Monroe and his wife Amy lead Tapestry, a ministry for adoptive and foster families at Irving Bible Church in Irving, Texas. You can find out more information about Tapestry and its plans for relief care at www.tapestry.irvingbible.org.