



Matt and Kristin Donovan enjoy time with their girls, 1-year-old Gracie and 4-year-old Jaimes. The Donovans lead FAM, a ministry at The Village Church in Highland Village, Texas. For more information, visit www.thevillagechurch.net.

Privileged to **Serve**

By Michael Monroe

I recently sat down to lunch with two men to talk about how they and others at their church could become more involved in helping children in need. In many ways the conversation was like many others I've had during the past couple of years with people from churches both large and small and from various denominations and traditions — all wanting to put their faith into action to love and serve children.

Increasingly people of faith are becoming more aware of the needs of countless chil-

Church-based Foster Care Ministries

These are just a few of the growing number of church-based foster care ministries that are making a difference in the lives of children in foster care across the United States:

- **Project 1.27 (www.project127.com)** — This ministry was launched in 2004 by Colorado Community Church in response to the needs of hundreds of children in Colorado waiting for adoptive families. Project 1.27 has a simple mission: “no more waiting children in Colorado.” Through a wide range of recruitment, training and support efforts, Project 1.27 has already helped to place 143 waiting children in Colorado in forever families. This effort now involves 16 churches and has nearly 300 families involved.
- **4Kids of South Florida (www.4KIDsofSFL.org)** — More than a decade ago Calvary Chapel in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., began a ministry to address the crisis in the local foster care system. Today, 4Kids has 12 residential sites that serve the needs of children and teens in foster care, provides support and training for foster families and has independent living programs for teens “aging out.” In addition, 4Kids has recently expanded to serve the needs of birth mothers and adoptive parents.



Bruce and Denise Kendrick, pictured with their three children from left, 6-year-old Macy, 3-year-old Shepherd and 4-year-old Kate, lead Embrace, a church-based foster care ministry in McKinney, Texas. The Kendricks have fostered 25 children and are currently in process to adopt for the first time.

- **Embrace (www.embracetexas.org)** — This effort is proof that small churches can do big things when it comes to serving children in foster care. This ministry began two years ago at Rhea’s Mill Baptist church in McKinney, Texas, and now serves foster children as well as helps to recruit, train and support foster parents. Embrace is also working with other area churches to help them launch similar efforts.
- **The C.A.L.L. (www.thecallinarkansas.org)** — The C.A.L.L. is a unique collaboration between the Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services and area Christian churches in the Little Rock area. During Sunday services, foster and adoptive families are recruited, with informational meetings that follow. Families are then walked through the process of becoming trained and certified to foster, adopt or provide respite care. State-required training is offered in a convenient, two-weekend condensed class by Christian volunteers. The C.A.L.L. also works to educate churches about ways they can effectively support adoptive and foster families.

dren worldwide. Recent reports count the world’s orphans at well more than 100 million, a number that is virtually impossible to fully comprehend, especially considering that each number represents not a statistic, but a real child in need of compassion, help and hope. As this awareness increases, people of faith, and their local places of worship, are seeking to become more involved in reaching out to serve these children in a variety of redemptive ways.

However, like my recent lunch companions it seems that too few people are equally aware of the needs of more than a half million children right here in our country — children in our own communities. As I talked with these men about the thousands of children in foster care where we live in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, as I explained to them that nearly 1,000 children in our area are waiting for a loving, forever family and that nearly 300 teenagers in our community “age-out” of the foster care system each and every year, their response was predictable. They had no idea.

For too long it seems there have been relatively few churches at the local level — where the people are — actively involved in serving children in foster care. This does not ignore or discount the decades of faithful service by Catholic Charities nor the work by ministries and organizations affiliated with the Methodist, Lutheran and Baptist denominations, just to name a few. However, when it comes to engaging the hearts and hands of the people in the pews, most churches have not reached out to serve children in care, nor have they sought to intentionally offer resources, encouragement and support to foster and adoptive parents. Instead, somewhere along the way, local churches concluded that this was primarily the responsibility of somebody else, and as a result churches faded into the background as state and private agencies, courts, attorneys and networks of civic volunteers were left to address the overwhelming demands of the children and parents.

But this, too, is now changing. Along with the increased awareness of the needs and opportunities to care for the world's orphans many churches are rediscovering the opportunity to take a seat at the table and rejoin the team seeking to address the needs of some of the most vulnerable children in our communities. Rather than arguing about whether children “here” or “there” should have greater priority, people of faith are recognizing that there are more than enough needs to go around.

Yet, as people of faith in our local churches prayerfully consider how they can get more involved in reaching out to children “here,” many questions arise about how to get started and what is needed to be most effective. As churches launch into the adventure of making children in foster care a priority and an intentional focus, I believe there are a few important things they should keep in mind.

BE HUMBLE, YET DETERMINED — There is a big difference between seeking to become

part of the solution and thinking that you “are the solution.” After being absent from the landscape for far too long, churches can sometimes make the mistake of coming to the table eager to point out the myriad of problems that exist in the system and all too willing to offer their ideas about how to fix them. Instead, churches need to understand that the foster care is a complex system with many moving parts. Parts of the system work well, others don't — but it will not be “fixed” overnight. In fact, what is needed most is not another “quick fix,” but more people committed to serving children for the right reasons and in the right ways. To be effective churches need to seek to understand the system and the various roles that people play and then identify needs that they can address and be committed to following through.

AVOID THE “PROJECT” MENTALITY —

Churches are often good at taking on “projects.” While there is nothing wrong with this and, in fact, short-term projects can sometimes be a great way for churches to get started, what is needed most when it comes to foster care is for communities of faith to make long-term commitments to serving children in a variety of ways. The simple truth is that these children are not “projects.” Rather than “here today and gone tomorrow,” we need churches that are willing to roll up their sleeves and commit to being available to serve kids in care year after year.

RESIST THE “FOSTER/ADOPT OR BUST”

APPROACH — Many people are surprised to find out that there are ways to love and serve children in care other than by becoming a foster or adoptive parent. As important as that is only a small fraction of people in most churches will ever pursue those paths. However, churches need to become creative and even innovative in offering a variety of ways for their people to respond to the needs of the children.

Here are a few ideas:

- Recruit and train mentors for teenagers

about to “age out.”

- Recruit CASA advocates; pray for children in foster care and for all of the people involved in their case.
- Collect and distribute supplies to meet the needs of foster and newly adoptive parents; contact a local foster care agency to find out what their kids need and then meet those needs on a regular basis.
- Recruit and train respite and relief parents so that every foster family in your church has at least one “back up” family to support them.

When it comes to kids in care there is often much talk about responsibility and civic duty. However, one of the unique hallmarks of communities of faith is the spirit in which they seek to serve those in need. I believe we need communities of faith all across the nation to understand that it is our privilege, not so much our responsibility, to love and serve children in care — and it is a privilege that we should fully and eagerly embrace.

As my lunch companions and I talked further about the needs of children in our community and the many ways that their congregation could get involved, it was amazing to see their apparent excitement about the possibilities of their church reaching out to and serving children locally. As this continues to happen with more and more churches — as more churches seek to understand the system and the needs of the kids and then commit to serve with humility and for the long-term — I am convinced they will experience the indescribable blessing and joy of being a part of a transformational work in the lives of countless children. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael Monroe, together with his wife Amy, leads Tapestry, the adoption and foster care ministry at Irving Bible Church. For more ideas about how your church can start a ministry and serve children in foster care, visit www.tapestry.irvingbible.org.