



Above, Priyanka Baliar Singh, 12, with her mother, Megharani (Megha) Baliar Singh, as she cooks outdoors. Below, Priyanka plays with her cousin outside of her home. CRS helps parents keep their families together.

WORLD

Family-Based Care: A Better Way for Children Than Orphanages

As many as 80% of children in orphanages globally have living parents unable to care for them due to lack of social support. A new

movement aims to reunite these children with families.

By Peter Jesserer Smith – Posted 8/4/17 at 3:33 PM

BHUBANESWAR, India — The day any child returns from the orphanage to his parents and community, Rejendra Meher tries to make a joyful, public celebration. He calls it the “Back to Family Celebration.”

“It says you’re part of society — your place is with us, not with the institution,” Meher, CEO of Youth Council for Development Alternatives (YCDA), told the Register. “They can see ‘my family and my community have welcomed me.’”

But Meher believes these “Back to Family Celebrations” need to happen on an exponentially larger scale: Most children residing in an orphanage are not actually orphans. They have living parents who are not able to care for them, mainly due to poverty or “a lack of basic services in the rural sectors.”

In the most recent orphanage he visited, approximately 75% of the children in residence had living parents.

For 10 years, Meher has been working with orphanages, which he says should be properly called residential child care institutions, to reunite children with their parents, next of kin or trained foster families. He is working with them to provide family support services that would allow parents to raise their children at home and make institutional child care the option of “last resort.” The parents just need the right social and economic support to take care of their children, he says, whether it be economic, housing, food, health care or educational support.

The effort to transform orphanages into centers of family support services, and reunite children with parents and families, has the firm support of the Bishop Sarat Nayak of the Diocese of Berhampur. He told the Register that prioritizing family-based care over institutional care reflects the Church's own teaching and vision for the family, which is irreplaceable.

"The best place the child can grow is the family," he said. "The best care a child can have is the family."

Orphanages in India, the bishop explained, were originally established in the 1850s as a response to catastrophic events, such as famine or war. So many parents and relatives had died that placing children into the care of other families was simply not possible. The missionaries who established these orphanages, he said, did their best to care for the children.

"It is quite different now," he said. The bishop noted that families would benefit from orphanages transitioning into institutions that could not only provide needed social services, but also day care support and specialized care for children with disabilities.

The diocese, Meher's organization and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) have been working together with public officials over the past six months to transition the child care system in Odisha state (one of 30 states in India) away from orphanages to family-based care.



The partnership is just in its beginning stages, but Meher said he is hopeful to see substantial change take place in the next few years.

A Global Reform

According to a 2009 report by Save the Children, an average 80%-90% of children in orphanages have one parent, or both, still living.

Catholic Relief Services is working with J.K. Rowling's Lumos foundation and Maestral International to help developing countries move from institutional child care to systems that prioritize family-based care. The organizations have partnered together to compete for a \$100-million grant from the MacArthur Foundation that would allow them to globalize the orphanage-to-family-based-care transition that CRS is supporting in Odisha.

The joint proposal has made it to the top eight semifinalists. The finalist in the MacArthur "100&Change" competition will be chosen in December.

Shannon Senefeld, CRS' senior vice president for overseas operations, told the Register that CRS has also been collaborating with church-based partners in Haiti, Zambia, Uganda and

Cambodia to transition children out of orphanages into families and provide parents the support they need.

The effort involves messaging on two fronts: One focuses on getting the word out to families that they may have better options to allow them to love and nurture their children than sending them to an institution for food, shelter and education.

But the other front involves helping private donors realize that they can make a difference in children's lives by financially supporting healthier and more cost-effective child care options than institutions, Senefeld said.

Having children raised by family, she said, can be 10 times less expensive than placing them in an orphanage. Senefeld explained the money used to support the 8 million children placed in orphanages could theoretically sustain 80 million children in family-based care.

Georgette Mulheir, CEO of Lumos, told the Register that in Haiti they estimate private donors send at least \$100 million to orphanages in order to care for 30,000 children. The figure amounts to more than \$3,300 per child per year. The sad irony, Mulheir said, is that if parents in Haiti had an extra \$200 per year to feed, clothe and educate their child, "that child would never go into an orphanage."

Lumos is seeking to help donors realize that they can be part of a positive solution in children's lives by funding the reunification of children with their parents and the transformation of orphanages into family-support centers, where parents can obtain economic assistance, health services, housing development, education and children's afterschool care — whatever they need to love and care for their children. The organization has been working successfully with good-intentioned directors of residential child care institutions and government officials.

Mulheir said these residential child care institutions can retain most of their existing employees to provide these services.

"There's a whole range of personnel needed," she said.

The major problem with these orphanage systems in poor countries, Mulheir explained, is human trafficking — and many donors are unwittingly funding it.

Mulheir pointed out that this is a big concern in Haiti, where only 15% of orphanages are actually registered with the government. The country's average annual per-capita income hovers around \$350. With tens of millions of dollars flowing into orphanages, running an orphanage becomes a lucrative business — and, unfortunately, the [majority](#) of operators are not doing it out of the goodness of their hearts.

In Haiti, Mulheir estimated approximately 20%-30% of orphanages in Haiti are run by "genuinely good people doing the best they can."

But the rest of them involve the trafficking of children to varying degrees, Mulheir explained, and need to be shut down. She said between 40%-60% of orphanages are run by people who employ “child finders” that may use deception or pressure to get parents to place their children into orphanages. Mulheir said in this scheme more children means more donations flowing to the institution. Another 10%-20% of orphanages, she said, are criminal enterprises, where children are not only trafficked into the institution, but they are further trafficked out for labor or sexual exploitation.

“We’ve just been scraping the surface,” she said. “We know what we’ve found in Haiti is in other countries, as well.”

Mulheir said governments in the developing world are trying to take this seriously. Haiti has adopted a national strategy to reduce trafficking, violence and de-institutionalize children. Colombia is trying to create a high-quality foster-care system, similar to the models already in Western Europe, to replace the orphanage system. Lumos itself has had great success working with the government of Moldova to reunite 70% of children in orphanages with their parents or highly qualified foster families.

Lifting Up Society

Over the course of the 20th century, social research into the normal, healthy development of children led the United States and Western European nations to make the transition away from institutionalizing children in orphanages to finding ways to empower parents to raise their children.

Bishop Nayak wants to see children and parents in Odisha state have the same opportunities. As a 12-year-old youth, he had to stay in hostels about 75 miles away from his village in order to obtain an education. But he noticed at the time the children who grew up without their parents did not have a sense of “rootedness” in their identity and society or a good understanding of how to have healthy close relationships, which comes from learning “familiarity” in the family.

He emphasized, “Nothing can replace the family.”

[Peter Jesserer Smith](#) is a Register staff reporter.