



Caring for Children Overseas

How do Christians in Ireland Engage?

A TEARFUND IRELAND REPORT JUNE 2026

tearfund
Ireland

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The ideas, opinions and comments contained in this resource are entirely the responsibility of Tearfund Ireland and do not necessarily represent or reflect DFA policy.



Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.'

Proverbs 31:8

¹ https://homecomingproject.org/assets/site/Homecoming_Project_Report_2024_Digital.pdf

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About Tearfund Ireland

Tearfund Ireland is a Christian international development and relief organisation committed to the transformation of vulnerable communities in specific regions around the world. Utilising quality development interventions and humanitarian relief in emergencies we work in relationship with local partners to assist people in transforming their communities. As a Christian organisation, we resource the church in Ireland, to practically demonstrate their faith by engaging in sustainable development, pursuing Biblical justice, and advocating on behalf of the world's marginalised.

We believe that children thrive in safe and nurturing families. We are part of the global effort to help keep families together and prevent the unnecessary institutionalisation of children, working with overseas partners on family strengthening, family reunification, fostering, and care leaver support.

In Ireland we raise awareness to encourage the church and the wider community to do the same.



'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



Foreword

For generations, Christians have maintained a firm conviction about the priority of caring for orphaned and vulnerable children. Rooted in Scripture is our belief that children are a gift from God, that the vulnerable should be protected, and that orphans and widows are to be looked after and cared for appropriately. Over the generations, we have been inspired by the missionaries in faraway places who established orphanages and built residential homes to care for vulnerable children. We have been encouraged by the stories of George Muller's amazing faith as he pursued God's provision for the many orphaned children in his care during the mid 19th century. And we grew up watching heart-warming films that demonstrated how a child could find friendship, protection, hope, or a family even if they were being raised in an orphanage.

I thank God for the people who saw a need and did something to help vulnerable children. I believe that many orphanages were established by people with good intentions. I also believe many children have been protected and cared for through orphanages. And, I know many Christians who speak of a deep, personal faith experience through their past support of orphanages.

However, while an orphanage may have been an acceptable solution in the past, that does not mean orphanages should be considered an ideal solution going forward.

Across the world, there is a rapidly growing shift away from the use of orphanages and residential institutions to care for vulnerable children. This shift is fuelled by research, by experts in the field, and, notably, by adults who grew up in orphanages and are now advocating for the closure of these types of homes and institutions. Additionally, many Christian organisations are actively working with those who run orphanages to help them transition so that families are strengthened, and children can be cared for in a family-based environment. Tearfund Ireland is a part of this global movement.

We believe that children belong in families, not institutions. For us, this is not only an issue of justice but goes to the heart of God's intention for people, and what is best for the child and their families. But, here in Ireland, support for orphanages remains strong among Churches and people of faith.

It is from this context that we publish this report. We wanted to better understand how Irish people engage in the care of vulnerable children around the world. In autumn 2025 we carried out research to identify the levels and types of support Irish Christians are providing to sustain orphanages and institutional based care. This report identifies important findings which we hope promotes important discussion among Christians in Ireland.

Ultimately, we all want the best for children. Our hope is that this report will help Christians in Ireland consider how we might support the best possible care for vulnerable children, even if that looks different from what we have done in the past.

Sean Copeland,
CEO Tearfund Ireland



"Children need to be in a stable caring environment provided by responsible adults. Families are best. Therefore anything we can do to strengthen fragile communities will help the children in them."

Survey Respondent

Overview and Introduction

Historically, orphanages have been a long-standing form of caring for children. This has been true in Ireland and internationally. However, there is growing awareness that institutional care has a negative, and often detrimental, impact on children.

Multiple academic studies demonstrate the adverse impact of long-term institutional care on children's development and long-term life outcomes. Analysis of 75 studies covering 3,800 children in 19 different countries found that children raised in orphanages had an IQ 20 points lower than their peers who had grown up in foster care¹. These children also experienced developmental delay in their physical bodies, with one study suggesting that children are delayed by one month of physical growth for every three months spent in an orphanage. One of the challenges often cited, particularly for younger children, is the lack of a constant caregiver in the early, formative years of life which enables children to learn how to form healthy, positive attachments; skills which remain necessary for flourishing and thriving throughout their life.

Furthermore, whilst orphanages were originally designed to care for children who did not have parents to care for them, current research suggests that nowadays, between 40% - 90% of children living in institutions worldwide have at least one living parent². It is often poverty that drives children into orphanages. An uncomfortable reality is that a majority of these children become vulnerable to exploitation and harm, yet their families do not experience any change in their level of poverty. Seng is a young man whose story demonstrates this unfortunate reality. Poverty and the false promise of a better education caused him to be separated from his family for many years, and this negatively impacted his well-being, cultural identity, his education, and even the stability of his family.

Seng* (Cambodia, name changed)

Seng lives in Cambodia. He was born into a family that regularly struggled to make ends meet. In the hope of accessing better education for their children, Seng's parents sent him and his brother to an orphanage some distance away whilst keeping their younger sister at home.

However the educational opportunities in the orphanage were little different to being at home, the children still went to the same type of local school that they would have attended if they had remained at home.

Seng and his brother were very anxious and missed their family terribly when living in the orphanage. So much so that his brother ran away. Seng and his brother were eventually sent back to their family because the orphanage couldn't manage them.

Sending the children away did little to improve the financial situation for Seng's family, the issue of poverty remained. In addition, Seng and his siblings faced the trauma of family separation and the impact of being placed in institutional care.

Some of the impacts Seng experienced included loss of cultural identity, struggling to plan for life decisions (as decisions were made for the children in the orphanage); low self-esteem and lack of functional life skills (for example how to handle money).

- 1 IQ of Children Growing Up in Children's Homes. A Meta-Analysis on IQ Delays in Orphanages. Marinus H. van IJzendoorn. Maartje P. C. M. Luijk. Femmie Juffer. Leiden University, MERRILL-PALMER, cited in 'The Negative Impact of Institutionalization on Children 0-3 years' by UNICEF [Accessed 8 April 2026]
- 2 Lumos. 2017. Children in Institutions: The Global Picture. Available at: https://lumos.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2017/03/Global_Numbers.pdf [Accessed 8 April 2026]; Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children 1: a systematic and integrative review of evidence regarding effects on development The Lancet Group Commission [Accessed 8 April 2026]

Worldwide, between 5.4 and 8 million children are currently living in orphanages. Yet there is a growing emphasis on ensuring that wherever possible, children are enabled to grow up in family-based care. Ideally, through being supported to remain living with their birth families or, where this is not possible, provided with alternative care through fostering or adoption. This emphasis is driven by a conviction, scientifically underpinned, that children belong in families, not institutions. No matter how well-run an orphanage is, growing up without the commitment and love of a family is detrimental to a child's well-being and development. Sometimes institutions are necessary as short-term solutions, however, due to the damaging psychological, emotional, physical, and social effects of institutionalisation, orphanages and residential care should only be used as a very last resort and, then, only as a temporary solution.

Ireland's own history

Ireland has its own history of orphanages and residential care institutions for children and one which has featured high levels of systematic abuse and neglect. From the 1940's; children were placed primarily into what were termed "reformatory" and "industrial schools", but also through "special needs schools", "mother and baby homes" and the "Magdalene Laundries". Many were placed in these institutions on the basis of being born out of marriage or being deemed to be destitute. The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (The Ryan Report³) details pervasive and horrific levels of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect within the institutions which were run by religious orders; primarily Catholic orders, but often funded by the State. The Commission of Investigation into the Mother and Baby Homes: 1922 – 1998⁴ found high levels of deprivation, physical and emotional abuse and rampant infant mortality rates. The testimony of survivors contained in both reports, speak of the long-term negative impacts for those who have been brought up and lived in these institutions.

Ireland is now committed to supporting families and to facilitating family based alternative care when and where it is needed. Foster care and kinship⁵ care now provide for most children who are in care. But there continue to be instances in which children, including those with disabilities and special needs, are being placed in residential institutions. We still have much to do to ensure families are strengthened and the rights of vulnerable children are protected.

Shifting Global Trends

Globally, there is a growing shift in policy and practice away from supporting orphanages and moving towards supporting families, so that, the child can remain with their parents and live within their community. This shift is underpinned by key human rights instruments including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child⁶; which affirms every child's right, including a child with a disability, to live with their parents and to grow up in their community and culture.

In Rwanda, the Government has developed an ambitious programme of care reform and family strengthening called Tubarerere Mu Muryango (TMM), translated to Let's Raise Children in Families⁷. The Rwandan move away from institutional care to family-based care has been transformational. Over 90 per cent of the 3,782 children without disabilities who were in institutional care in 2012 had been placed in family care by the end of 2022⁸. This programme, supported by UNICEF is rooted in Rwandan cultural values, which place a strong emphasis on family care¹.

3 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3c76d0-the-report-of-the-commission-to-inquire-into-child-abuse-the-ryan-re/>

4 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d4b3d-final-report-of-the-commission-of-investigation-into-mother-and-baby-homes/>

5 Care with extended family

6 <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-conventio>

7 <https://www.unicef.org/rwanda/reports/child-care-reform-programme-rwanda>

8 <https://www.unicef.org/rwanda/media/5391/file/Child%20Protection%20in%20Rwanda.pdf>

In 2022 the Kenyan Government launched a 10-year Care Reform strategy for the country. The focus of the strategy is to accelerate the transition of children and young people from institutions and situations where they are unaccompanied or separated into family and community-based care⁹.

In 2025, Ireland became a signatory to the Global Charter on Children's Care Reform¹⁰. The Global Charter seeks to bring governments, civil society, faith groups, and individuals with lived experience of care systems together to call on world leaders to join forces in a global movement that harnesses decades of international progress to ensure all children are growing up in a safe, nurturing and loving family environment. As a signatory to the Global Charter, the government of Ireland has committed to:

- strengthen families and prevent unnecessary separation
- ensure safe, family-based alternative care
- end the use of institutions for children around the world

How the Church is Responding

Christians, motivated by their faith, have a long-standing involvement in the care of children, both at home and overseas, with many of those at the forefront of establishing orphanages and residential care settings. However, as the body of research surrounding the benefits of family care for children over institutional care has evolved and grown, education within the Irish Church itself has lagged behind. This research project seeks to identify the extent to which support from within the Irish Church for children overseas has kept pace with best practice, to encourage a change in the way that Christians in Ireland seek to care for children globally.

Need for more focus by the church

"I don't think my church is focused enough on this. It's emergency appeals which draw my attention and prompt me to give."

Survey Respondent



9 <https://nccs.go.ke/sites/default/files/resources/OVERVIEW%20OF%20THE%20NATIONAL%20CARE%20REFORM%20FOR%20CHILDREN%20%20PRESENTATION-.pdf>

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-charter-on-childrens-care-reform>

Summary of Findings

KEY FINDINGS

1. The Irish church is motivated to support vulnerable children
2. A significant amount of money is being directed to institutional settings which do not and cannot provide the highest quality care
3. There is an appetite for change among the Church in Ireland and a growing sense of responsibility about the way in which Christians are supporting vulnerable children.

This Research Shows:

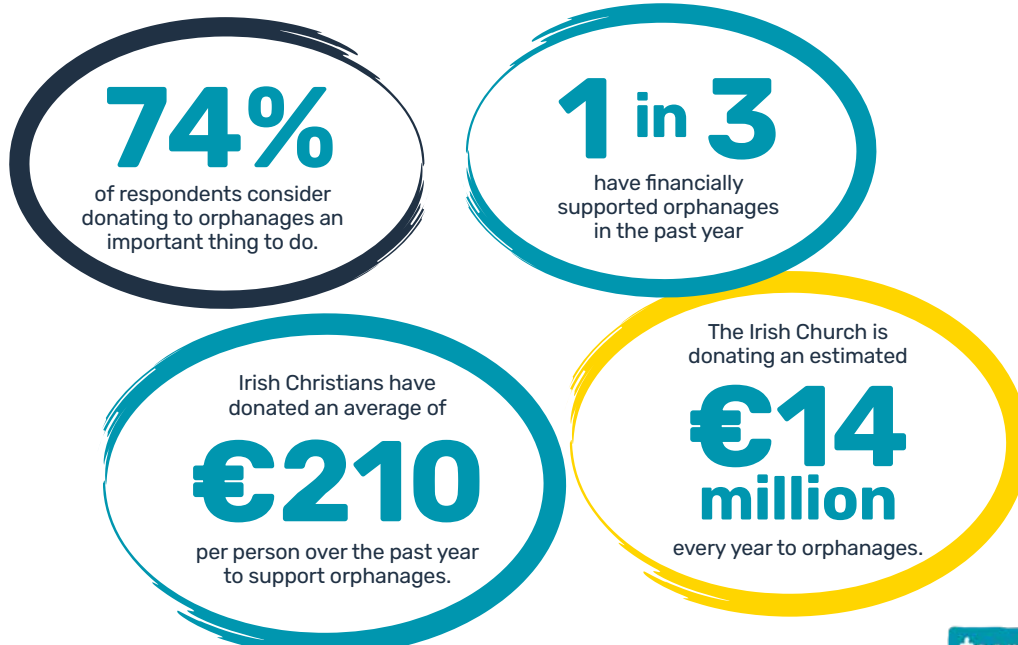
A significant amount of money is being directed to institutional settings which do not and cannot provide the highest quality care

- 74% of respondents consider donating to orphanages an important thing to do.
- 1 in 3 have financially supported orphanages in the past year.
- Irish Christians have donated an average of €210 per person over the past year to support orphanages.
- The Irish Church is donating an estimated €14 million every year to orphanages.

There is an appetite for change among the Church in Ireland and a growing sense of responsibility about the way in which Christians are supporting vulnerable children.

- 96% of respondents believe that supporting community-based projects overseas is an important way to help vulnerable children.
- Regular church goers are marginally more likely to donate to family and community-based projects rather than to orphanages.
- 1 in 2 have donated to family or community-based projects in the past year. 27% of regular church goers have not donated to orphanages and have stated that they would not do so in the future, 36% of regular church goers prefer to give to family and community-based projects instead.

Conclusion: The moment is ripe to build momentum around this growing awareness and sense of responsibility within the Church. Tearfund Ireland is committed to supporting the Irish Church to change the way we care for vulnerable children overseas.



Survey Findings

Common ways the Irish Church is engaging with vulnerable children overseas

The most popular way of engaging is financial giving or in-kind support of community-based projects (57%). This is followed by Child Sponsorship and Donations to one-off emergency appeals, with a third of participants actively engaged in these kinds of programmes. For a smaller number of respondents, visiting and volunteering with community based projects is still viewed as an important way to help vulnerable children.

Financial or In-Kind support for Community-Based projects

This is important and I'm actively doing it	57.5%
This is important but I'm not actively doing it	38.5%
This is important only in certain circumstances	3%
Not important	0.5%
Don't know	0.5%

Child Sponsorship

This is important and I'm actively doing it	35%
This is important but I'm not actively doing it	44%
This is important only in certain circumstances	12%
Not important	6%
Don't know	3%

Donating to One-Off Appeals

This is important and I'm actively doing it	35%
This is important but I'm not actively doing it	29%
This is important only in certain circumstances	26%
Not important	7%
Don't know	4%

Visiting or Volunteering with Community

This is important and I'm actively doing it	10%
This is important but I'm not actively doing it	55.5%
This is important only in certain circumstances	25.5%
Not important	5%
Don't know	4%

Financial or In-Kind support for Orphanages	
This is important and I'm actively doing it	28.5%
This is important but I'm not actively doing it	45.3%
This is important only in certain circumstances	15.6%
Not important	5.6%
Don't know	5%

Donating Money to Residential Care Facilities

Of the respondents who said they had donated to residential care facilities for children overseas, 28% do this directly and 17% do this through their local church. A further 24% say they will probably donate to a residential care in the future, while 18% say they will not donate to an overseas residential facility.

Donating Money to Residential Care Facilities	
Yes I do so directly	28%
Yes I do so through my local church	17%
No but I probably will in the future	24%
No but I would not do so in the future	18%
Don't know	13%

Approximately how much did you donate to residential care?

The most common donations are between €1 and €150 euro (38%) and between €151 and €500 (35%). 12% of respondent prefer not to disclose the amount of their donation.

Where is the residential care facility based?

Respondents supported care facilities in nineteen African countries, eight Asian countries, six South American countries, five European countries and two Middle Eastern countries. The top countries selected were: Uganda, Romania, Togo, India, Kenya, Ukraine, Columbia and Tanzania.

Volunteering with residential care facilities

One in four respondents have volunteered at overseas residential care facilities but only about half would be eager to do so again. 20% who have never volunteered stated they would love to do so but over half of the respondents who have not volunteered and would not consider doing so in the future.

Visiting or Volunteering with Orphanages	
This is important and I'm actively doing it	5%
This is important but I'm not actively doing it	45.5%
This is important only in certain circumstances	31.5%
Not important	14%
Don't know	4%

Location of care facilities

The ten most common locations for volunteers visiting orphanages or residential care facilities were: Romania, Mozambique, Kenya, Russia, Uganda, Brazil, India, Lesotho, Ukraine, and Zambia.

Good intentions can be harmful



The idea of “giving back” or ‘making a difference’ by volunteering overseas is well known in Ireland. Many of us have either volunteered overseas ourselves or know someone who has. Volunteering in orphanages is popular with many travellers, who value the idea of spending time caring for or teaching children living in residential care. Although it is usually done with the best of intentions, research shows that volunteering in orphanages fuels systems that separate children from their families, harms their development, and increases the risk of them being abused¹¹. Even well run, well-resourced orphanages with staff that care about the children cannot replace the care and stability of family-based care in the community.

The transient and superficial nature of volunteering can exacerbate a child’s sense of abandonment and loss as volunteers enter and then exit in quick succession from the children’s lives.

Children need to develop a secure and stable relationship with a primary caregiver so they can develop emotionally, cognitively, and socially. Many of the children in orphanages have been separated from the vital relationships with their primary caregivers and, as a result of this disruption, are extremely vulnerable. The lack of individualised care and stable relationships inherent in institutions adds to the children’s confusion about relationships, self-worth, and security. Children who greet volunteers with open arms, wanting to be picked up and hugged are most likely displaying symptoms of Attachment Disorder. These children desperately want to be loved but that love needs to come from someone who can offer a long-term and stable relationship. Not, we believe, from volunteers.

Tearfund Ireland is actively working to stop the practice of volunteering in orphanages. For more information please visit our website.

Awareness of Charities working with vulnerable children overseas

Unsurprisingly, for a Tearfund Ireland survey, Tearfund Ireland itself was the most commonly mentioned charity. There were 54 charities mentioned overall, demonstrating that the Church in Ireland is engaging with a wide range of organisations, both small and large, both local and global in focus.

¹¹ Misguided Altruism: The Risks of Orphanage Volunteering [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(19\)30213-5/abstract](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(19)30213-5/abstract)

Denominational Analysis

In the last 12 months have you donated to orphanages (personally or through the church)?

Denomination	Percentage
Independent Evangelical	36%
Anglican/Church of Ireland	25%
Pentecostal	15%
CCI Network	6%
Presbyterian	6%
Baptist	5%
Methodist	2%
Roman Catholic	2%
Redeemed Christian Church of God	1%

How much did church goers in Ireland give to residential care facilities?

Based on a similar calculation in the UK, our survey findings suggest the following:

- 38% of survey respondents told us how much they gave. A conservative estimate of the average amount of their donations is between €210 and €310.
- If 35% of the adult population of Ireland (4.1 million) are regular church goers¹² (1.4 million adults), this suggests that church goers in Ireland donated between €14 million and €21 million to residential care facilities over the last 12 months.



¹² European Social Survey data found that 35% of Irish adults, and 25% of Irish young adults, report attending religious services on at least a monthly basis <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/The-Turning-Tide-Final-Draft.pdf> page 4

Recommendations and Opportunities

Held altogether, these research findings demonstrate that the Irish Church is deeply concerned about the needs of vulnerable children overseas; and is invested in supporting these children. However, these findings also highlight the opportunity to ensure this support is redirected towards projects and initiatives which truly hold children's needs at the heart. As such, this report sets out the following recommendations to enable the Irish Church to catalyse change for vulnerable children around the world.

The Church in Ireland should be supported to understand:

- the needs of vulnerable children globally
- the adverse impact of institutional care
- the opportunity, within family care, to enable vulnerable children globally to thrive

For Churches currently supporting orphanages

- Review the overseas initiatives supported by your church and church members to gain an understanding of where you are supporting institutional care and family care.
- Recognise and use your influence as a church to begin dialogue with organisations you are in partnership with, to explore their current use of institutional-based care and encourage them to transition towards family and community-based models of care.
- Redirect your support only after exploring opportunities to partner towards family care models. (It is advisable to only do this with advanced notice. Immediate withdrawal of funds could result in enhanced vulnerability and harm to children.)
- Reconsider the practice of sending volunteers on short-term mission trips to orphanages and residential care facilities overseas. While well-intentioned, such practices can reinforce trauma, loss, and broken attachments for children living in these settings.

For individual Christians supporting orphanages overseas

- Reach out to the orphanages you are supporting (either financially or through volunteering) to initiate a conversation about the use of the funding they receive and whether they have a strategy to transition towards family models of care. Resources are available to assist you.¹³ This may include supporting kinship care options or working with government or local agencies to develop fostering or adoption services in their country.
- Research for yourself the impact of orphanages on vulnerable children and the positive opportunity presented through family care to enable children to thrive.¹⁴

Finally, while this research has provided a snapshot of the Irish Church's involvement and investment in supporting vulnerable children overseas, further research is needed to ensure a more representative sample of the Irish Church as a whole. Further insights into the views, motivations, and convictions of younger generations within the Church would be of significant benefit.

¹³ <https://homecomingproject.org/resource/homecoming-due-diligence-tool>

¹⁴ Sign up for a Tearfund Ireland Learning Journey and explore other resources on the Tearfund Ireland website <https://info.tearfund.ie/learningjourneys>

Appendix 1: Demographics of respondents

A total of 204 people took part in the survey. Of these 83 were male (40.5%) 120 were women (59%) and one person ticked "prefer not to say" (0.5%). There was a greater engagement by men in this survey than in most previous surveys conducted by the researcher (approx. 5% more than usual). While there was a spread of age groups represented, it is notable that more than two-thirds of respondents (68%) were over the age of 45 with 20% over the age of 65. While it would be unwise to draw firm conclusions from this, it would imply that the main people engaging with Tearfund Ireland are an older demographic.

More than half of the respondents were living in Dublin (54%) with another 19% in Leinster (outside of Dublin). 11% of respondents were in Munster with another 11% divided between Connacht and Ulster (ROI). Just over 3% of respondents were living in Northern Ireland and four people came from outside of Ireland.

Church denomination: Respondents were predominately from Protestant denominations with those from evangelical/Pentecostal and Anglican churches accounting for almost three quarters of respondents (73%).

Level of Engagement with Church: Respondents had an extremely high level of engagement with their local church (significantly higher than in other surveys undertaken by Tearfund Ireland) with 78% describing themselves as committed church members with an active involvement in the local church and a further 8% as committed church members without an active involvement. 6% have sporadic church attendance or only on special occasions, 4% no longer attend and a further 4% are part of an informal Christian community rather than formal church.



Need for awareness, information and education

"Much education amongst Irish donors is required to help them understand the potential harm of institutional care."

Survey Respondent



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