

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Are We Serving Orphans?

How churches are transitioning to best-practice care

“Our church sends youth to love on kids at an orphanage each summer. The orphans get excited about all that our teens do for them. Let me show you some pictures!”

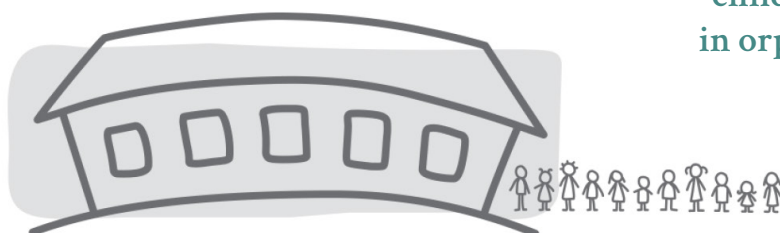
Does this statement describe your church’s connection to an orphanage somewhere around the world? Often orphanage ministry is one of a church’s most-popular global missions efforts because there is such an emotional attachment to needy children. Yet disturbing facts about the orphanage model, especially the impact of Western short-term ministries in Majority World orphanages, are causing many churches to rethink their strategy for orphan ministry abroad.

The orphanage model was abandoned decades ago in almost every Western society, yet orphanages have continued to house vulnerable children in other parts in the world. However, in the past few years a number of orphanage ministries around the globe, as well as some supporting churches in the West, have changed course as they recognized the following realities.

- 1 Most so-called orphans still have at least one living parent or other family members who are willing to care for them.
- 2 Poverty is a primary reason children are placed in orphanages.
- 3 Strengthening families and addressing children's basic needs could enable many to remain in family care.
- 4 Families provide the best environment for a child's development.
- 5 Children living in orphanages are at greater risk for long-term negative impacts on their social, emotional, and cognitive development.
- 6 Good practice dictates having a full range of care options available for children in need, with emphasis on care within families.
- 7 All vulnerable children need to be protected from abuse, neglect, and deprivation of basic needs, whether they live in an orphanage or a traditional home.
- 8 Ensuring that all children are well cared for, ideally within a family, requires the involvement and collaboration of multiple entities.

For an expanded explanation of these points, see lesson 1, page 12, of the [Journey to Faith](#) study guide published by the [Faith to Action Initiative](#).

The sad truth.

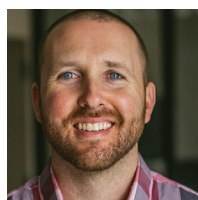


It's estimated that
5,000,000+
children live
in orphanages.

Of these,
4,000,000+
have at least one
living parent.

Many are placed in orphanages by their
parents or relatives just to meet their
children's basic material needs.

If your church is deeply involved with an orphanage ministry, the facts on page 2 may be unsettling. Making a major strategy transition is not easy, but Western church leaders can't ignore their responsibility to engage best practices. Here's



one church's experience as told by Missions Pastor Joe Stewart.

Liberty Christian Fellowship

Liberty Christian Fellowship had partnered with an orphanage in Haiti for nine years. An enthusiastic team of church members organized ministry trips and were passionate about supporting the orphanage. Yet others who went to serve there came back disillusioned about the ministry; an honest report

from one team made it clear that drastic change was needed.

STUDYING THE BIG PICTURE

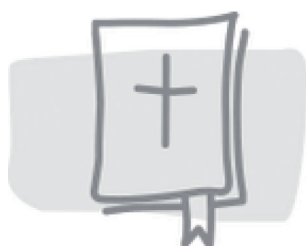
Soon after I came on as missions pastor two years ago, I spent a week observing this ministry first hand. Among other things, I learned that a fair number of the children were not orphans but came from families who said they had no resources to care for them. Others were street children placed in the orphanage by the government.

I came home aware that something had to change, yet I knew that I needed to build some consensus. Kids are a trump card. When you are dealing with orphans, people's hearts are very tied to them, and they find it hard to be objective.

To move forward with consensus, we decided to involve the church's overall leadership team, the missions leadership

team, and the leaders of our Haiti missions team—16 people in all—in the review process. Creating this inclusive task force would increase the transparency of our process. Discussions included orphan care in general and specifically our partner orphanage. There were a lot of opinions.

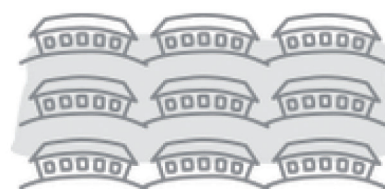
We soon recognized that we needed objective input, so I initiated discussions with six organizations that were specialists in orphan care. Some promoted only family reunification. Some also did orphanage ministry. Some were Christian organizations; some were not. I quickly learned a lot. In addition, we collected research about the psychological issues related to children in orphanage care. All of this input was carefully collated and disseminated to the entire group of 16.



Scripture, life experience, and years of academic research all agree...



Children grow best in families.



Yet, too often, the response is to build another orphanage to meet children's needs.

When you are dealing with orphans, people's hearts are very tied to them, and they find it hard to be objective.

IDENTIFYING REALISTIC, HEALTHY ALTERNATIVES

Based on what we learned, Lead Pastor Tim Fritson and I developed a long list of improvements that would be needed to make the orphanage meet government standards and provide minimum quality care for the children and staff. The list was daunting. Two things became obvious: (1) We couldn't fund or implement from the U.S. all of the changes that were vital to meet the standards we had become convinced were essential, and (2) we needed to have a face-to-face discussion with the Haitian leader of the ministries. We were ready to help fund a family reintegration program that would cost far less and be better for the children in the long run.

Tim and I flew to New York City (where the Haitian leader now resides) and sat down with this brother, a godly man whom we believe desires to see the ministries under his leadership

flourish. He seemed genuinely interested in our research. However, he was unwilling to consider another model. We sadly realized that we could not continue our partnership, but we did commit to continue support through the end of the current year so as to not create an immediate crisis for the organization.

HELPING THE CONGREGATION TRANSITION

Back at our church, we had some difficult meetings with our task force. We talked. We had prayer meetings asking God for unity. But it became clear that several people were not willing to dissolve our partnership, no matter what. In the end, our church leadership team made the final decision to withdraw from the partnership. We met with the task force and with the entire Haiti ministry team to inform them of the decision and answer questions. Subsequently an email informed the congregation that the partnership had been

dissolved, and a follow-up meeting was scheduled to provide additional information to any who were interested.

We are using this transition to continue to realign all of our missions endeavors with our priority to focus on indigenous church planting in unreached people groups. We are also committed to being advocates for family reunification. In the future, some of our Global Impact Teams may engage in a project related to vulnerable children and their families. It's been an arduous and at times painful seven months of working our way through this issue, but I believe we are leading in the right direction. 🏠



Supporting family care
is a better choice.



Supporting churches have great potential to impact ministries to transition toward better practices. It is challenging to ask tough questions of a partner you are trying to empower. However, we have found that global partners are often excited when a church supports them in trying new things to improve their care for children. – Elli Oswald, interim director, Faith to Action Initiative

Liberty's story highlights the challenges of walking a church through the process of moving away from a dearly loved ministry when it is clear that the model fails the very children it is designed to rescue. Other pastors and church missions leaders have admitted that they need to wrestle with this issue but know that it will be difficult. Perhaps you are one of them.

Fortunately, helpful resources are available. [Faith to Action Initiative](#) is a coalition of ministries which has come together to provide guidance and resources on best practices to both global orphan ministries as well as local churches that want to serve vulnerable children. Their website provides an array of materials for those who want to implement healthy family reunification. If you are a church leader just beginning to

research this area, the amount of information may be daunting. Here are some suggested steps.

GETTING STARTED

1 Begin with leader learning.

Familiarize yourself with the issues surrounding best practices for orphans and vulnerable children by going through the “Learn” section of the [Faith to Action website](#). Walk your missions leadership team through the [infographic](#) and then suggest they read through the [Children, Orphanages & Families booklet](#). If you want to delve deeper, there are lots of articles and research data on this site.

2 Study together.

Bring together a small group of interested persons to prayerfully and carefully work through the “[Journeys](#)

[of Faith](#)” study together. We suggest that you include one or more people with a social work degree and experience working with vulnerable children in your own context. As you study together, ask God to give you a conviction as to the best practices for helping orphans, regardless of where they are.

3 Dialog with your global partners involved in orphan care.

Discuss what you are learning with your global partners heading up orphanage ministry or otherwise involved in caring for vulnerable children. Share with them pertinent information and ask them to share with you their philosophy. Many Majority World leaders are

not familiar with models other than the institutional orphanage.

4 Visit a new model.

Plan a survey trip to visit a family reunification ministry that has a history of success. [Contact](#) Faith to Action for places where you can see good programs in action. If you have a global partner who runs an orphanage, pay their way to visit this new model with you.

5 Consider best practices for short-term ministry to orphans.

This [Short-Term Missions booklet](#) provides extensive background information and suggestions. If your church's short-term ministry to orphans has engaged in service that may be causing harm, sit down with your short-term teams leader or others who have been involved, and talk about

the potential dangers and alternatives. Be prepared for initial resistance, but give them an opportunity to consider the advantages of a different approach. Listen to their hearts as well as their words!

6 Take other church leaders on the learning journey.


If your church needs to make a major shift in orphan ministry, it would be wise to educate your whole pastoral staff and other church leaders in the basic issues and why you think a transition is essential. Any of the above materials would be helpful. Discuss with them how you can walk your congregation through this transition.

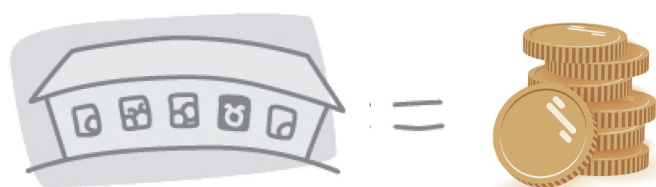
7 Invite orphan sponsors in your church into the learning process.

If you are shifting away from orphanage support and have church families who have been supporting an orphan in

that context, you will need to help them understand the shift. Develop concrete ways that they can continue to be engaged with children in healthy reintegration ministry. Begin educating your congregation about how implementing best practices can serve many more children than an orphanage model.

8 If your church wants to begin ministry to vulnerable children, select your global partner carefully.

[“Finding a Child-Safe Partner: A Check List for Churches”](#) provides guidelines. 



The cost of supporting a child in an orphanage is 5-10 times higher than supporting a child in a family.

Better Ways to Care for Kids at Home and Abroad



Dan Hamer, Senior Associate Pastor

Overlake Christian Church's

care for orphans began with adoption of children both

domestically and globally. Staff led the way. But it quickly became apparent that children's loss of their first family involved grief and trauma. For children adopted from other countries, it also meant adapting to an entirely new culture as well. We discovered that it required a complete heart and culture shift in our church to get down into the mess of the orphan crisis. Giving money is easy, but connecting with broken families here in the US or with vulnerable street kids in Kitale, Kenya, is tough.

As a church we entered into that messiness along with the adopting families and global partners. Through patient development over 12 years, we have been building relationships, and both our people and our global partners are learning that there are better ways to care for kids than putting them in an orphanage. In addition to working locally to improve the foster care system, Overlake began to work with a Kenyan orphanage willing to try a new model. Eventually they were able to connect 181

kids in the city of Kisumu back to their families or extended family. The remaining two were adopted into staff homes.

Seeing the success of reintegration, the orphanage converted into a transition center where a small number of children could stay for up to three months of rehabilitation. During this time, the ministry also worked with the family to make sure they had the financial, emotional, and spiritual resources to care for the returning child. To date, this program has reintegrated 2,000 children back into families—10 times the number that could be accommodated in the original orphanage.

The challenge is to get the Kenyan churches to see these children as their responsibility and not the responsibility of an NGO from America. These programs need to be a tool for the churches to care for the children, not take the place of the local church.

We here at Overlake like to say, "We stubbornly believe that the Church is the answer." Our vision is to help other churches reproduce this model across the world.

Facilitating Local Leadership



*Paul Scholten, South Africa
Ministry Coordinator*

[Christ Memorial Church](#) had a long history of ministry in South Africa. But around 2011,

we began encountering a growing number of abandoned children in Botshabelo, a city of 200,000 people where we had been working. We inaugurated day programs for these kids, but it was quickly evident that this was totally inadequate. So we turned to Bethany Christian Services and asked them to engage their expertise.

Bethany began by bringing together 50-75 people from the community—primarily pastors and social workers—to do an in-depth assessment. We were all dismayed by the size of the problem. It was clear that a high-quality, family-strengthening, community-based program was needed. You can [watch the story](#) of how the whole project developed.

Christ Memorial made important contributions to the project: First, we brought a lot of community credibility because we had worked there for a long time in collaboration with the United Reformed Church in that city. So we were the best partner to come alongside the pastors to help them understand their role in helping reunified families succeed.

In addition, Christ Memorial helped expand organizational capacity. Bethany Christian Services had clinical expertise, but it was Christ Memorial that helped the local leaders learn how to build the organization from scratch—like establishing a financial system, a personnel system, etc. Most of this was done via Skype with a couple of four- to six-week trips each year. Christ Memorial is part of the Reformed Church of America and our denomination also played a role in the process by recruiting other churches to be a part, even hiring a staff person just to get more churches successfully engaged.

Our church is now wrestling with how we can help to multiply this model in other places where it is desperately needed. We welcome pastors and other leaders from sister churches to join us on survey trips to catch the vision and have a part in ministry. A recent trip involved leading a three-day seminar on marriage and family for pastors and their wives because strengthening the African church also strengthens the family reintegration process. Seeing this program's success in Botshabelo powerfully demonstrates that the model can transform the lives of vulnerable children around the world.

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