



Chris Hondros / Getty Images

The Trouble With the Christian Adoption Movement

Evangelical Americans believed adoption could save children in the developing world from poverty—and save their souls.

BY KATHRYN JOYCE

January 11, 2016

In 2009 a Tennessee couple made a life-changing decision. As devout Christians, they decided to open their home to an orphaned girl from Ethiopia, whom they were told had been abandoned. They knew enough from fellow adoptive parents to expect that the process would be long and hard, but as they were waiting for their application to go through, something unexpected happened. A number of Ethiopian staff at their adoption agency were arrested for transporting children to a different region of the country where they could claim the children had been abandoned. (Following a glut of adoption cases where children were said to have been abandoned in the capital city of Addis Ababa, the court had temporarily stopped processing “abandonment adoptions” of children from the city, but were still allowing cases from elsewhere in the country.)

The stories about where the children came from—whether they were abandoned orphans whose parents were unknown, or their parents were poor and had willingly given them up—seemed to change from day to day. Concerned, but by now committed to the child they’d come to think of as their future daughter, the Tennessee family went ahead with the adoption. But, as I wrote in my book *The Child Catchers*, after they brought the girl back to the United States and she learned

enough English to say so, she told them she had another mother. When they called the agency to demand an explanation, the child's claim was confirmed: their newly adopted daughter was not an orphan.

On a personal level, the news was devastating. The family felt like they'd stolen someone's child; wanting to find out the truth, they set off on a months-long, and ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to locate their daughter's biological mother. But their story turned out to be just one of many: a single example of the numerous incidents of adoption corruption that, in the last several years, have helped changed the direction of a powerful adoption movement among U.S. evangelicals.

At the time of the Tennessee incident, adoption was a preeminent

evangelical social cause in the United States. Beginning in the early 2000s, American evangelicals became one of the most powerful forces in international adoption, lining up devout believers to follow the biblical mandate that Christians care for "orphans and widows in their distress." This call would become a movement that launched major conferences, spawned a small library of books on "adoption theology," and changed the complexion of many conservative U.S. churches.

In 2007, national Christian leaders like celebrity pastor Rick Warren encouraged their followers to shift their focus from issues of "moral purity"—abortion, same-sex marriage, divorce—to something more positive: helping children in need. More than just "pro-life," it would be a "whole life" response to the longstanding pro-choice challenge that Christians adopt all the children they wanted to be born. It would also be an extension of existing evangelical engagement with global development and health issues. Promoting adoption would help rebrand U.S. evangelicals, from moral scolds to children's champions.

The premise of the movement was a particularly American response to global child poverty. It was based on the idea that the existence of somewhere between 143 and 210 million vulnerable children around the world—a number that also includes those who live with one parent or extended family, often in poor conditions—constituted an "orphan crisis," but that there were also 2 billion Christians who could help. If just a fraction of those claiming to be Christians stepped up to adopt, the movement's leaders argued, parentless and hungry children, as a category, would cease to exist. As one leader put it, the goal was to "get as many people in the church to adopt, and adopt as many kids as you can."

Evangelicals responded in huge numbers. Churches began to create adoption ministries, praising and supporting adoptive parents and encouraging new families to adopt as well. Anti-abortion

crisis pregnancy centers redoubled their efforts to cast adoption as the pro-life alternative to abortion. Evangelical adoption funds popped up, giving grants or interest-free loans to couples hoping to adopt (particularly pastors, whose potential adoptions were viewed as a priority, since they could set the example for an entire congregation). In 2009, the Southern Baptist Convention, the second-largest denomination in the United States, passed a resolution directing all members to consider whether God was calling on them to adopt. A coalition group, the Christian Alliance for Orphans, grew to encompass more than a hundred evangelical nonprofits and denominational groups united around “orphan care.” In 2010 Bethany Christian Services, the largest adoption agency in the country, reported a 26 percent jump in the number of adoptions, largely due to the mobilization of Christians newly interested in adopting.

The same year, when Haiti was rocked by a devastating 7.0-level earthquake, the Christian adoption movement became a full-blown cause. The movement threw its weight behind efforts to expedite U.S. visas for unaccompanied Haitian children, so they could leave their country and enter waiting U.S. homes. So many prospective adoptive families inquired about Haitian

“earthquake orphans” that Bethany Christian Services began diverting applicants to other countries like Ethiopia, which were then undergoing “adoption booms,” thanks to a combination of poverty and lax laws. (The crisis and subsequent response also gave birth to the most notable scandal in the young Christian adoption movement, when a group of Idaho Baptists traveled to Haiti to gather “orphans” off the streets, with the intention of bringing them to an as-yet-unbuilt adoption center in the Dominican Republic. None of the children, it would turn out, were orphans.)

But, just as in Haiti, many of the children being adopted from places like Ethiopia weren’t orphans either. As journalist E.J. Graff has extensively documented, the numbers cited for the orphan crisis are a significant misrepresentation of UNICEF estimates of vulnerable children. Although UNICEF representatives say that no accurate number exists for “true” orphans—that is, children with no parents and in need of a new home—the organization estimates that some 90 percent of so-called orphans have lost only one parent, and many of the remaining 10 percent live with extended family. What that means is that many children who live in orphanages in the developing world (often because of poverty or because their parents have no one to care for them while they work), as well as many children sent abroad for adoption, aren’t real orphans at all. And the crisis

The stories of how children were put up for adoption began to sound strangely similar, as though there was a global epidemic of children left, Moses-like, in baskets.

at hand isn't so much an orphan crisis as a crisis of poverty, food insecurity, conflict, and a host of other, less sensational development issues that have rendered children especially vulnerable.

But in the Christian adoption movement's rush to do good, those complexities were forgotten, along with the children's families. The movement began to refer to adoption as a means of "redeeming orphans"—saving them just as Christians are redeemed when they are born again—and their families became either forgotten footnotes or ugly caricatures. Adoption agencies, anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centers that referred mothers to these agencies, and Christian ministries often cast domestic "birth mothers" as either selfless martyrs or hopeless, promiscuous addicts—bad influences from whom children must be saved. In international adoptions, birth parents were more likely to be erased altogether, as adoption agencies sometimes wrongly claimed that they were dead or dying. Members of the Christian adoption community sometimes spoke of the children in developing nations as an indistinguishable mass, wherein any child of an impoverished parent was viewed as the equivalent of an "orphan" and was labeled as such. The stories of how children were put up for adoption began to sound strangely similar, as though there was a global epidemic of children left, Moses-like, in baskets by police stations, dumpsters, or fields.

The reality, of course, was more complicated. Many children were relinquished for adoption because of poverty alone. Some families who gave up their children for adoption later explained that they'd thought the child would return when they were older or that the adoptive family was becoming a sponsor of the birth family back home, and would help them transcend their circumstances. On rarer occasions, there were stories of how babies were simply bought or kidnapped.

Ethical problems in adoption didn't start with this modern Christian movement. In the early days of U.S. domestic adoption, from 1854 to 1929, some 100,000–250,000 East Coast children were taken by workers at the Children's Aid Society, an early child welfare organization. Children were taken from inner city slums, put on "orphan trains," and shipped West to be adopted. Sometimes the adoptions took place as one might hope—a child legitimately welcomed into another family—and sometimes they were closer to a form of indentured servitude for the still-settling West. (Almost all followed the rationale of the orphan-train movement's founding father, Charles Loring Brace. A nineteenth-century progressive social reformer who founded the Children's Aid Society with support from philanthropists and businessmen, Brace argued that allowing children to grow up in their overcrowded Irish and

Italian New York City homes would foster the development of a “dangerous class” of criminals, “growing up almost sure to be prostitutes and rogues!”)

Domestic adoption took on new life from the 1950s to the 1970s. This period saw the spread of maternity homes where millions of unwed pregnant women were sent to live in confinement and deliver their babies in secret—what many of these mothers now call the “Baby Scoop Era”—before relinquishing them to infertile couples. International adoptions gained popularity around the same time, effectively starting in South Korea. Biracial, “mail-order” Korean infants were removed to the United States by the thousands, sometimes to poorly vetted homes that were unprepared to parent children from another culture. (Many of the earliest international adoptive parents were conservative Christians who shared the beliefs of Harry and Bertha Holt, the Oregon couple who pioneered Korean adoptions and whose ad hoc adoption program became the basis for the longest-standing international adoption agency in the world, Holt International Children’s Services.) As domestic adoption declined after the legalization of abortion and the increased acceptance of single motherhood, international adoption expanded dramatically to a wide range of countries. A pattern began to play out in country after country: initial demand followed by an influx of corrupting Western cash and an endgame of coercion, fraud, and often, eventual closure or suspension of the country’s adoption program.

Although American adoption law is complicated and domestic regulations vary from state to state, much of the legal framework for adoption developed over the last fifty years has been tailored to the interests of adoptive parents. This is unsurprising, since those who adopt tend to be more powerful and richer than birth parents. Additionally, a system of tax incentives that subsidize individual adoptions, short windows for birth parents to revoke their consent, and sealed birth certificates that prevent adoptees from learning their biological history reinforce this divide in favor of the adoptive parents.

When the Christian adoption movement was at its strongest in the late 2000s and early 2010s, many of its excesses looked like a condensed version of earlier problems with adoption. As Christian adoptive parents lined up to help, paying \$30,000–\$40,000 per internationally adopted child (in fees that are divided among agency payments, travel, and orphanage donations), their demand helped create new adoption markets. This was particularly true in African nations, where the combination of poverty, opportunism, and cultural misunderstanding of the meaning of adoption—often construed as temporary guardianship rather than permanent relinquishment of a child—led to children repeatedly being offered, or in some cases taken, for adoption based on mistaken beliefs or outright profiteering. (In an infamous 2009 example documented by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a staff member for an American evangelical adoption

agency was filmed leading what appeared to be a mass adoption recruitment effort, asking the assembled residents of a rural Ethiopian village whether they wanted their child “to go to America.”)

The movement built to such a pitch that even those within the evangelical community began to complain about miscarriages of scripture. “I have never understood some people’s interpretation of the scripture James 1:27, where it says, ‘Visit orphans and widows in their

distress,’” said Keren Riley, a child welfare advocate and devout Christian who works in Uganda. “By some people’s actions involved in international adoption you would think it said, ‘Visit widows, take their orphans and leave them both in distress.’”

Around 2010, a new set of problems began to emerge. There was the proliferation of stories like that of the Tennessee family, where children said to be orphans turned out to have living family, who, in some cases, expected their return. In the United States, some adoptive families, caught up in the movement’s mission-based call to adopt “as many children as you can,” did so, ending up with super-sized families with sometimes tragic results. Some adoptive children were abused or even killed at the hands of their adoptive parents, like thirteen-year-old Ethiopian adoptee Hana Williams, whose case I documented in 2013. A shocking number of stories emerged of children who had been sent away from their “forever families,” either to new, un-vetted adoptive homes, back to their countries of origin, or just cast out on the streets.

To David Smolin, a law professor at Cumberland School of Law, as well as a longtime Christian advocate for ethical adoption reform, these adoption horror stories collectively amounted to a tidal wave of bad publicity. The Christian adoption movement had expected good press and a secular pat on the back for having put their money where their mouth was. The response they received instead came as a shock.

But if the movement grew rapidly, so did its recognition of the systemic problems plaguing adoption. A number of critics emerged, often Christian adoptive families who had come to rethink the community’s unquestioning focus on adoption as a solution to broader issues of poverty and instability, and who challenged leaders to pay attention to their experiences. One couple, Caleb and Becca David, who adopted two Ethiopian children and ran short-term missionary trips for Christians to work with children in the country, told me that, as incredible as adoption was, “we’d

In the United States, some adoptive families ended up with super-sized families with sometimes tragic results.

be naïve to think that was the only answer... We feel like our eyes are being opened about the importance of holistic orphan care. Because ultimately, it's not about us having our child."

Additionally, generations of adoptees came of age and began to organize—starting organizations like Land of Gazillion Adoptees and Lost Daughters—where they discussed their own stories in ways that few adoption advocates could ignore. Other adoptee organizations in South Korea and Ethiopia began to work directly with poor or single parents, to help them avoid losing children to adoption. As these stories have begun to be heard in the last several years, the Christian adoption movement has undergone a sea change. A number of its most prominent advocates, including the leadership of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, have begun to focus on the forgotten half of the “widows and orphans” mandate—the existing families of those orphans.

There's a practical reason for this shift as well. International adoption as a whole has contracted drastically, with the number of children entering the United States falling by two-thirds since the peak of international adoptions in 2004. Numerous nations slowed or shut down their adoption programs for a variety of reasons. China's economic development, for example, led to increased domestic demand for adoptable children. Russia stopped sending its orphaned children to the United States for complicated political reasons. Still others, like Guatemala, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ethiopia, reduced or stopped adoptions completely following corruption scandals involving children wrongly sent abroad.

As a result, scores of adoption agencies have gone out of business, and this summer, one of the most stalwart international adoption lobby organizations, the Joint Council on International Children's Services, closed shop as well. A 2013 bill drafted by adoption advocacy organizations and initially supported by Christian adoption leaders was designed to dramatically increase international adoptions—what many saw as a last-ditch effort to revive the failing industry—but it gained little support and ultimately failed. On the whole, says Smolin, the infrastructure for international adoption is crumbling. The boom of previous years has begun to look like just that: an unnatural increase that was never sustainable.

Part of the Christian adoption movement's change in direction, notes

Smolin, is simply a reflection of this new reality: it's hard to continue forcefully advocating for international adoption when the supply has declined so much. “It's not that [the Christian adoption movement has] admitted being wrong about international adoption,” he told me, “but they just don't talk about it that much anymore.”

However, Smolin also sees a change of heart among Christian adoption advocates. Starting in 2014, the flagship coalition of the movement, the Christian Alliance for Orphans, began to back away from promoting international adoption at its annual conferences. Movement leaders invited Smolin to speak at their annual conferences as a critical voice from within, and the audience seemed increasingly sympathetic to his concerns. To Smolin, it seems like the movement has at last caught up with modern, secular discourse about child welfare: rather than make a messianic call for white U.S. evangelicals to save “Third World children,” the church has been wading into the thorny, technocratic issues that dominate international child policy debates. Today, he said, it is common at annual conferences to discuss whether orphanages are ever appropriate shelters for children, and how to support domestic fostering initiatives in developing nations. “It’s not the same movement that it was,” said Smolin.

Jedd Medefind, president of the Christian Alliance for Orphans, agrees that there’s been a significant shift in the movement’s emphasis. “I’d note a steady ‘maturing’ in understanding and priorities overall. I think there’s still a recognition that there are many children that do very much need families today (both in the U.S. foster context and globally), but also a counter-balancing desire to do all possible to preserve and reunify struggling families and to promote local adoption in developing countries.”

Some Christian adoptive parents who might once have been drawn to the movement have instead led the way in creating small, local organizations in developing nations designed to help broker local adoptions or foster care initiatives, removing the profit motive from the question of child stability. In Ethiopia, for example, one such group has worked to establish daycare centers for the children of working mothers, so that a woman isn’t forced to place a child in an orphanage in order to provide for the rest of her family.

In Uganda, a nonprofit run by Keren Riley, Reunite, helps support and resettle children wrongly placed in orphanages or offered for international adoption with their biological families (often after prospective adoptive families begin to suspect something is wrong and contact

Reunite to investigate). Though a small organization funded primarily by donations, Reunite has to date helped place thirty-five children back with their Ugandan parents or other relatives.

Reunite has to date helped place thirty-five children back with their Ugandan parents or other relatives.

These attempts are still small, and don't yet have the same momentum or finances that the massive effort to promote adoption once did. But on an ideological level, it amounts to a major shift in thinking. Over the course of a few short years, the Christian adoption movement grew to reenact some of the most significant and troubling problems within the adoption industry: its propensity to disregard or demonize birth families, to minimize the significance of adopted children's heritage, and to participate in a system that too often needlessly separates families for profit. But many of these advocates have begun to recognize those problems and are now trying to make them right. And larger organizations like Lumos, a nonprofit founded by author J.K. Rowling to combat unnecessary institutionalization of children in orphanages, have bolstered the call.

The changes in the U.S. movement haven't completely solved the problems in adoption. Riley said the pace of adoptions in Uganda hasn't changed, and most of the adoptive parents she meets are still U.S. Christians. And, as I've reported elsewhere, some of the old problems of international adoption have been replicated among vulnerable immigrant communities within the United States. Additionally, for the many thousands of children adopted during the height of the American international adoption boom—whether secular or religious—the decades ahead are likely to bring more questions, and possibly years of searching for the families they left behind.

This article appears in Dissent's new "Family Politics" issue, available now. To find out more visit Dissent magazine.

Kathryn Joyce is a contributing editor at the *New Republic* and author of *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking And The New Gospel of Adoption*. [@kathrynajoyce](https://twitter.com/kathrynajoyce)